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JUNE 1999

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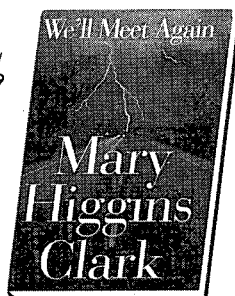
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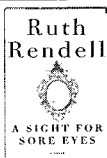
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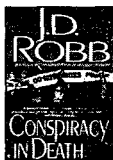
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GUEST EDITORIAL

Joe Michael Feist

The following photograph and story, from the January 31, 1999, edition of the Bryan-College Station (Texas) Eagle, was sent us by J. F. Peirce, a frequent Mysterious Photograph winner and runner-up. Joe Michael Feist, is the Eagle's managing editor.—ED.

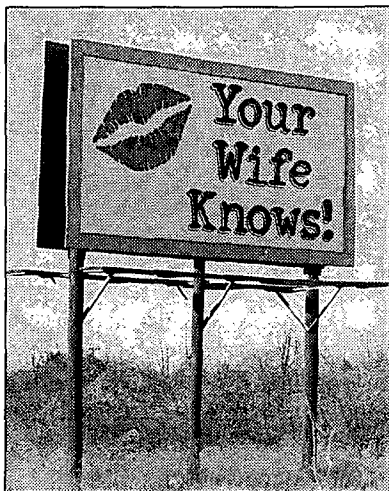
I just love a good mystery. Like what's in Spam, and would you eat it if you knew. Or why it's illegal not to wear a seat belt, but it's OK for women to apply mascara at 70 mph.

But boy, there's a much better puzzler going on right now in the Bryan-College Station area. Seen those billboards all over town? You know, the ones out on F.M. 2818 and on Texas Avenue, with a big red lipstick smooch and the words "Your Wife Knows."

Ever wonder about those signs? You're not the only one, believe me.

Now the best thing about being a journalist for me—and this is a

dirty little secret—is that I get to stick my nose where it don't belong. (English teachers: I know that should read "where it doesn't



Dave McDermand / Bryan-College Station (Texas) Eagle

belong," but it sounds better to my ear to say "where it don't belong." Save your stamps, please, unless you're praising.)

So, the other day when I was

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trying to avoid real work, I decided to look into those smooch signs. I thought it might be the opening act in a teaser campaign, or the work of some church with a moral message. Or it might be saying that your wife knows you love her or something like that. Could be something nice. Or maybe not.

Anyway, called Ed Staples, the general manager of Advantage Outdoors, and asked for the scoop. He was a bit hesitant at first but, under my relentless questioning, honed by many years of being nosy, he relented. To a point.

The signs, which went up in early December, are not teasers and weren't bought by any church, Staples said. The real story is a whole lot juicier. And baffling.

"Evidently, some ladies around town know that something is going on," Staples said. Something? Well, you know, that kind of something.

Staples doesn't know any specifics, or won't reveal any, but said that four women have paid for the signs. And being relatively new in town, he knows the four, who obviously don't want their names known, "by signature only."

The signs, according to Staples, have caused quite a ruckus among the married, male population.

"It's a wide open playing field," Staples said. "That's the problem. It could be anybody. Somebody may have gone to a club and danced with somebody and got a little out

of line and somebody found out about it. Or something else."

He said he gets as many as a dozen phone calls a day from married men who always ask the same questions: The wife knows WHAT, exactly? and Who put those signs up?

"Right after the weekend is when we get the most calls," Staples said, inviting me to put two and two together.

"I've never seen anything like it," he said, "and I've been in the business 14 years. It's a funny little situation, but it's probably not so funny if we all knew the truth."

Staples said he called a couple of florists around town and was told that business is up considerably over this time last year. He sees a connection, and I see his point.

Any husband who drives by that billboard and feels the least bit guilty about anything will be drawn to a flower shop like a june bug to a bug zapper.

One thing is for sure, Staples added: The four women are serious about getting their message across.

"Those boards aren't cheap," he said. "We're talking about \$2,200 a month, plus paper. They'll have about \$7,000 invested before it's all over."

The signs are scheduled to come down in the next 30 to 45 days, but I'm hoping the mystery somehow continues. This sure beats working.

YOU MAY ALREADY BE A WINNER

Ron Goulart



She showed up on crutches. Night had just closed in around his cottage, and a hot wind was rushing through the darkened streets of the beach town.

"I'm completely and totally reformed," announced Casey McLeod an instant after he opened his front door. "From this moment on, Wes,

I intend to tell you nothing but the absolute truth."

Wes Goodhill meant to shut the door in her face despite the fact that she looked terrific standing there in a candy-striped blouse and a short dark blue skirt. But, as usual, he found that he couldn't bring himself to close the damn thing. Instead, he

opened the weathered door wider and frowned out at her. "Where have you been for the past five months? You disappeared out of my life that night in Santa Monica and left me—"

A powerful gust of wind hit her in the back, causing Casey to lose her balance on the wobbly wooden crutches. She dropped one crutch, stumbled forward. "Yikes," she commented.

Wes lunged ahead to catch her. "Easy now," he cautioned, getting hold of her beneath her arms.

The other crutch fell away, and she and Wes went staggering into his small living room.

He managed to hold onto her and remain upright. He guided her—she was limping, favoring her left leg—over to his sofa. "Sit," he suggested, untangling himself from her and letting her topple back into a seated position. "Before you explain—or rather, before you spin some incredible falsehood to account for your whereabouts since last we met, Casey, tell me about these crutches."

"I sprained my ankle."

"How?"

"Jumping out a window."

"Um." He brought the crutches in from where they'd fallen on his porch, shut the door, and laid them out side by side against the living room wall. "And what tall tale have you concocted to account for jumping out a window? How high up was it, by the way?"

"Two stories," she answered, frowning up at him. "Listen now, Wes, I really am a changed and reformed person. I admit that in the

past, in spite of the lovely times I had while living with you here in your cosy little place in Santa Rita Beach, I tended on occasion to stretch the truth a bit. But, and it's ironic that the very man who helped me to reform and turn into a morale person, is the very same one who—"

"Moral," he corrected.

"Exactly," she said, nodding and then bending to massage her bare right ankle. "What I'm attempting to convey is that while I may've fibbed some in the past, I don't do that now."

"Fibbed is hardly an adequate word to describe the monumental lies and downright falsehoods you've told me during the various times we've lived together, Case," he told her. "You are a master of duplicity and deceit, a world class prevaricator, a—"

"But basically we love each other and that's why I always return to—"

"Return to the scene of your crimes," he cut in. "And granted you may love me, Casey, but there have also been dozens of other fellows who also—"

"There you go, exaggerating." She held up her left hand and began ticking off the fingers. "There can't have been more than five or six men I was unfaithful to you with during our whole and entire relationship to date. Let's see, there was Roy, Carlos, Scott, and that—"

"Never mind," he said, scowling at her. "Fidelity isn't a matter of quantity anyway. Even one clandestine affair is sufficient to—who the hell was Scott?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "I thought you knew about him," Casey said. "No matter. Let's move on to the serious stuff. I want to explain why I've come back to you—come back to stay." She tried a small smile on him.

"Stay? You intend to squat here with me again?"

"Well, isn't that what sweethearts do? After all, Wes, you've been the love of my life ever since—"

"One of a herd of loves of your life," he said, making a but-never-mind gesture. "Get back to telling me why you jumped out a window."

"Well, ninny, why do people usually jump out of windows? To escape pursuit from an assassin, obviously."

"No, some people jump because their houses are on fire, others because they've been driven to suicide by an unfaithful mate," he said, sitting on the farther arm of the sofa. "Who was attempting to assassinate you this time?"

"You make it sound as though I'm trying to con you, when actually I came damned close to having my throat cut," she said, angry.

"Someone attacked you with a knife?"

"Well, they had knives when they broke into the mansion," she replied. "I assumed, from the way they were waving them around, that they sure as heck were going to use them on—"

"What mansion?"

Sighing, Casey leaned back. "Suppose you control your compunction to keep interrupting and—"

"Compulsion," he said. "And I don't think it's neurotic of me to be

skeptical about the details in these fantasies you concoct."

"Here I completely change my character for you. I struggle to be completely open and honest, Wes, and you turn a deaf ear." Casey sniffled twice, smoothed down her short skirt. "If you could simply quit hassling me for a minute or two, I'll tell you the whole sorry story. And, I guarantee, it'll be the complete and absolute truth." She drew a cross on one of her breasts. "Cross my heart."

"Your heart is on the other side," he pointed out, lowering himself to a sofa cushion. "All right, okay. Tell me and I'll try not to cry out in pain every time you try to drag in some momentous lie."

Casey gave him a sideways glance. She smoothed her skirt again.

"Well," she began, "while I was in the Bahamas two and a half months ago, I happened to meet—"

"Is that where you were making your movie?"

"What movie?"

"In your most recent farewell note, Case, you mentioned that you were planning to make a movie with the money you had left over from—"

"It's really touching the way you remember all the little details like that." Smiling, she reached out to pat his hand. "But, no, actually, I was overcome with wanderlust before I ever got around to thinking about getting involved with another film after *Death Virgins of the Amazon*. I simply bummed around the world for awhile and ended up in the Bahamas. That's where I met

Richard Barnson. Do you know who he is?"

Wes thought. "Movie actor, long time ago?"

"Yes. For about ten years there, starting right after the end of the Second World War, he was very successful in the movies, specializing in what they call *film noir*," she said. "*Dark Alley* was his biggest hit, also *Weep Not, My Wanton* and *The Big Double Cross*. Well, the point is that, unlike many washed-up actors, Dick held onto his money."

"Ah."

"No, I didn't try to talk him out of any money," she said. "He wanted to write his autobiography, and he hired me to help him."

"You're not a writer, Case. You're a part-time actress who specializes in television commercials and a part-time cartoonist."

"That's not fair. Do I accuse you of being a part-time animator?"

"No, because animation is my profession and I work at it full time."

"You're simply splitting rails."

"Splitting hairs."

"Anyway, I came back here to Southern Cal with Dick Barnson, and I've been living in his place in Bel Air and working very hard on his memoirs with him."

"Is his the mansion you jumped out of?"

"No, and stop interrupting," she warned. "Dick, by the way, is eighty-two years old, so there's no reason for you to be jealous of him. The important thing is that he knew Neva Maxton."

Wes looked blank. "Who is?"

"She was that sexy blonde ac-

tress who disappeared without a trace way back in 1953," explained Casey. "Neva and Dick costarred in *Dark Alley*, which they run on American Movie Classics just about every week. It's a *noir* classic."

"What does any of this have to do with your jumping out a window?"

"I'm giving you the back story first," Casey told him a bit impatiently. "It turns out, you see, that Dick Barnson knows what really happened to Neva Maxton. She didn't run away at all." Casey shook her head. "Her husband, much like you, was inordinately jealous. He trailed her to one of her rendezvouses up near Lake Tahoe. Then, in a fit of passion, he strangled her. He buried her in a remote spot in the woods, and because he could afford to establish an ironclad alibi, he was never even suspected of having anything to do with it."

"How does this old actor of yours know that?"

"Because Dick was the one she was shackled up with that fatal weekend. Luckily for him, he'd gone out to do some birdwatching that afternoon. But as fate would have it, he was puttering around, unseen, in the very stretch of woods that Dewitt Clannahan, that's the irate husband, chose for his burial plot. Hunkering down behind some handy shrubbery, Dick Barnson witnessed the whole burial ceremony and he also got a close enough look at the poor woman's body to realize she'd been throttled."

"How come he didn't call the police or the sheriff?"

"Well, he couldn't, dummy," she said. "He was married himself at

the time, and getting involved with a front page scandal—murder, adultery, burial in the woods—that would've ruined his career. It was a much more conservative era."

"So Barnson is planning to include the truth about this in his bio?"

"Yes, exactly. Neva Maxton is dead after all. Clannahan, her dippy husband, moved to Europe right after the murder and died there years ago," she said. "It'll make a great chapter, and it's sure to get picked up for serialization in one of the supermarket tabs." She sighed, and slumped.

"But?"

She said quietly, "During this same period I've been consulting Alan Omony."

"The self-help guru who wrote *How to Succeed at Success?*"

"That Alan Omony, yes."

"I saw a couple of minutes of one of his infomercials one night when I had insomnia, Case. He's a complete fraud, a con man who—"

"No, he's really quite good at helping people with their problems," she insisted. "Since I had a very nice financial arrangement with poor Dick, I was able to afford to see Alan for two fifty-minute sessions each and every week. He's the one who cured me."

"Cured you of what?"

"My compulsive tendency to fib."

"If you're cured, Casey, why are you telling me this fantastic—"

"Every darn word is true." Mad, she gave a sudden quick jab to his upper arm. "Oh, I know I'm like the boy who cried woof. Nobody will—"

"Wolf."

"It turns out it was a mistake to

mention to Alan what Dick had told me about the circumstances of Neva's death."

"Why?"

"Dewitt Clannahan, during the period when he didn't doubt the faithfulness of his wife, showered her with jewels and baubles. The collection was estimated at being worth half a million dollars. Lord knows how much the stuff has appreciated since the 1950's."

"Don't tell me Clannahan buried the stuff with her?"

"No, no, Neva had already hidden it someplace. She was figuring to leave him soon. She drew a little map outlining where the gems were stashed and folded it up in this gold heart-shaped locket she always wore. Her goofy husband, of course, didn't know about that and buried her with the darn locket still around her neck."

"But your guru found out about this? How?"

"Alan Omony is a real *film noir* buff, and he bid on a lot of Neva Maxton's effects at an auction in Pasadena five years ago," she replied. "He has all kinds of detective movie artifacts, including one of the fedoras Dick Powell wore in *Murder, My Sweet*. The thing is, he knew that the secret to the location of maybe a million dollars in jewels was in Neva's locket. But up until I went and blabbed what poor Dick Barnson had confided in me, nobody on the face of the earth had any idea what had become of her or the locket."

"Okay, what's been going on since you told Omony?"

"I haven't got any real proof that

he's responsible, but he has to be the one behind all this."

"All what?"

"Well, somebody has kidnapped Dick Barnson," she said forlornly. "That has to be because they want him to take them to the spot where Neva's remains are. Soon as I came home and realized what'd happened, I departed for elsewhere. That was yesterday and—"

"Where've you been staying since?"

"At another mansion, this one in Beverly Hills," she answered. "A realtor friend of mine let me use a place they haven't been able to unload for months. Oh, and he's gay as a three dollar bill, so you don't have to be jealous of him either."

"But somebody found you there?"

"Two goons with knives broke in early this morning," she said. "I was able to jump out the window and, in spite of really bunging up my damn ankle, get away in my Mercedes. I hadn't even dragged my luggage into the new place, so that's still all in my possession."

Wes left the sofa, walked over to the windows to look out at the dark ocean. "What about Barnson? Shouldn't you go to the police about what you suspect?"

"I don't have proof of anything," she said. "It looked to me like somebody broke into his mansion and carried him off after a struggle. But the cops could say he got drunk, smashed a few things, and wandered off on a binge."

"Nobody followed you here?"

"Of course not," she said. "I took a very circumspect route from the walk-in clinic in Santa Monica."

She gestured at the crutches. "Did you know you have to leave a fifty dollar deposit on those things?"

"If any of what you've told me is true, Casey, then I figure you're working on some way of using me to go up to Lake Tahoe and find the remains of this long-gone actress. After a little grave robbing, I'll probably end up helping you hunt for the jewels. Isn't that so?"

"No, damn you." She stood up, wobbling, and glared at him. "That's not the scenario at all. I don't want any further part of this mess. I hope they don't hurt Dick Barnson too badly, but I don't intend to do anything to stop that. The million dollars in loot can stay hidden for all I care." She took a few limping steps in his direction. "I really have reformed, and what I'd like to do is stay here with you and work on the next issue of my independent comic book, *Bertha the Biker*. That is, if you'll let me move back in, Wes."

After a few silent seconds he nodded. "Sure, you can stay," he said. "But for now, use the guest room."

It was raining in Studio City. A warm, wind-tossed rain that spattered the windows of Wes's middle-sized office at the Spare Arts Animation Studios.

Not quite right, he thought, shaking his head and pushing back from his drawing board.

He was supposed to be designing a pair of tapdancing elephants for an upcoming thirty-second cartoon spot advertising the new Ginkgo Bar—The Candy That Helps You Remember!! But he concluded that

his elephants didn't have any grace and, worse, they didn't look as though they possessed exceptional memories.

Nobody who wears a straw hat ever looks all that bright, he decided, picking up an eraser.

He dropped it, left his chair, and wandered to the window to stare out at the rainy afternoon. His brooding about Casey was probably affecting his creativity.

Normally he should've been able to turn out a pair of dancing elephants in a couple of hours. And both of them would have ended up looking as graceful as Fred Astaire.

Casey had been back living with him for four days now. In all that time he hadn't detected any fantastic yarns from her, not even a single small fib. She hadn't tried to con him in any way, nor had she mentioned his helping to unearth that long-missing actress so they could locate the lost gems. It was very unsettling.

Could she really have reformed?

Heavy, trotting footfalls suddenly sounded out in the corridor. Then Mike Filchock, dripping rain and shaking his furled polka dot umbrella, popped into the office. "Have you seen the paper?" the redhaired screenwriter inquired as he shed a dramatic-looking black trenchcoat. "I rushed right over from my office at the Wheelan Studios when I spotted this."

"Is it something about Casey?" Wes left the window to approach his friend. "Don't drip on those storyboards, huh?"

"This transcends storyboards." From inside his aggressively plaid

sportscoat Filchock tugged out a folded newspaper. "Take a look at page three."

"Paper's soggy." Gingerly, Wes managed to get the wet paper unfurled and opened to the page.

The entire lower half was given over to the story and photos. The headline said: RICHARD BARNSON, TOUGH GUY ACTOR OF THE PAST, FOUND DEAD. The subhead explained: FORMER STAR, 83, TORTURED AND KILLED TWO DAYS AGO.

"Casey didn't do this," said Wes. "She's been with me ever since—"

"That's not my point, dear chum," Filchock told him. "After that recent dizzy spell, during which you were temporarily insane enough to allow the Bride of Frankenstein to move back in with you, you told me about the latest spin she'd put on reality. Her tall tale, as I recall, was woven around this now defunct actor chap."

"But this proves she's been telling me the truth for a change." Wes shook the limp, wet newspaper.

"What it proves, dimwit, is that once again Casey McLeod is involved in some complex criminal venture," countered his friend. "This latest incident, by the way, won't look good in ads wherein she tries to get more work as a ghost autobiographer. Due to the murder of my latest client, I am now able to take on a new assignment from—"

"Wait now," said Wes. "It says here in the story that Barnson's body was found by a couple of hikers in a patch of wilderness near Lake Tahoe. That indicates that whoever grabbed the guy took him up there to persuade him to show them where what's-her-name's body

is buried. All of that confirms Casey's story to me, Mike."

"Nope, it only proves that she probably knew they were going to knock off the poor old coot," said Filchcock. "Casey needed a place to lie low and establish an alibi. That was, as so many times in the past, your humble hacienda." He shrugged. "If you're lucky, her fellow felons have divided the loot they stole from Barnson and scattered to the four winds. Soon as she gets her share, hopefully she'll vanish again."

Wes shook his head and tapped the soggy news story. "There's something else that's bothering me."

"Were I you, I'd start calculating how many years I was likely to serve in the pokey for being an accessory after the—"

"If they killed Barnson after he told them everything, they probably have found the jewels by now," Wes said slowly. "But if he died before giving them the secret, they could come after Casey to see what she knows."

"You're getting stressed over a fantasy yarn that—"

"I've got to call her." Wes hurried to the phone on his taboret, grabbed it up, and punched out his own number.

The phone rang four times, and then he heard his own voice on the answering tape. After the beep he said, "Casey, if you're there, pick up. It's me and this is important."

There was no response.

The afternoon rain had grown heavier, and the stretch of Pacific beyond Wes's cottage was dark and

choppy. He left his car in the short, curved driveway, went running across the sparse lawn to his porch.

After unlocking the front door he dived into the shadowy living room. "Casey?"

There didn't appear to be any unusual disorder.

"Casey?" he repeated loudly.

From the bedroom came a small throat-clearing sound. He ran in there. "Is that you, Wes?" her voice inquired quietly.

"Yeah, why the—"

"Don't go bellowing like a bulldog, I'm—"

"Bullfrog. What are you doing in the closet?"

The door creaked as she pushed it halfway open and stepped out. She was wearing jeans, a sweat-shirt whose faded message advocated fair treatment for dolphins, and no makeup.

"Are you alone?" she inquired as she glanced around. She'd given up her crutches but still had a slight limp.

"What's wrong?" He skirted the unmade bed, moving up close to the subdued blonde.

She put her hand on his arm. "I haven't been completely and absolutely truthful with you."

"Did you have something to do with killing Barnson?"

"Not *that* untruthful, for Pete's sake," she said. "I just meant, Wes, that I know a little more about the location of Neva Maxton's body than I may've let on."

"But you've heard about Barnson's being dead?" Wes pointed in the general direction of north. "Up near Lake Tahoe."

She nodded forlornly. "Yes, it was on the news while I was having breakfast," she answered. "That prompted me, I have to admit, to do something kind of stupid."

"Stupider than what you've already been doing, you mean?"

She pressed a palm against his chest. "Wait now," she told him, frowning. "Except for slightly fudging the facts about how much I knew, everything I've told you this time around has been the truth."

"Okay, so what'd you do?"

Casey sighed. "Well, I thought that since poor Dick Barnson was dead and gone, his attorneys and heirs and hangers-on would probably be descending on his mansion any minute," she explained. "So I knew I'd better sneak over there quick and gather up the rest of my belongings that I had to abandon when I moved out in such a hurry."

"That *was* stupid," he agreed.

"True, but the point is . . ." She gave an annoyed shrug of her shoulders. "I walked in on those same two creeps who tried to chop me up the other night."

"Jesus, Casey, did they—"

"They didn't even see me," she assured him with a very dim smile of triumph. "But I sure as heck saw them. They were ransacking Dick's den. The big bald one was going over all his papers and files, and the other one was checking through his computer records."

"Looking for what?"

"This." From her hip pocket she took a floppy disk and held it up. "It's the part of his memoirs where he gives the specifics about exactly where Neva's buried. We even

scanned in a little map he drew of the spot."

"You snuck that out of there today?"

"No, I took it about a week ago and hid it away," she said. "See, I had a feeling that something—"

"You had a feeling you were going up there and do some grave robbing?"

She gave an angry shake of her head.

"That wasn't my motive at all," she said. "I've told you that the McLeods have a long tradition in our native Ireland of being gifted with the second sight, don't you know. I'd been up to having meself a premonition that—"

"You forget that you've also told me that McLeod is a name you took when you decided to become an actress," he reminded her. "What the authentic McLeods over on the Old Sod can accomplish when it comes to seeing the future doesn't have much to do with—"

"Listen, the point you have to grasp is that these jerks were at Dick Barnson's mansion *today*, Wes." She looked him straight in the eye. "You see what that must mean?"

"They still don't know where she's buried," he answered. "Meaning he died before he told them enough."

"That's it exactly," she said, nodding. "It's all terribly clear what we have to do next."

"Hide in the closet?"

"Oh, I only ducked in there when I heard you come stomping up the porch like a flock of elephants," Casey said.

"All right, what scheme have you come up with now?"

"This isn't a scheme, it's a strategy to save both our lives."

"Our lives—how'd I get on this hit list?"

She made an impatient noise. "When they come up empty at Dick's place, they're sure as hell going to come hunting for me again," she said. "Alan Omony is their boss, and he knows that I know a lot about this whole business."

She took a step forward to tap Wes on his chest. "Alan is a very persistent man. In fact, *persevere* is number seven on his list of thirteen steps to wealth and happiness. Or maybe it's number eight. Anyway, the guy isn't going to give up short of tracking me down and torturing the truth out of me." She gave Wes a brief, pitying look. "Naturally, my dearest friend in the world is also likely to get hurt."

He backed away from her. "I hope I'm wrong about this," he said, "but I suspect you want to beat them to the treasure. Go up to Tahoe, find the body of this *film noir* actress?"

"Now you're acting less like a dummy," she said encouragingly. "That's just exactly what we have to do, Wes. We get hold of that lock-et and the map inside, then we go right straight to the jewels. Once this is all out in the open, Omony's minions will have no reason to keep chasing us."

"We could put all this out in the open right now," he suggested. "Tell what you know and let the police and the insurance companies do the digging and the hunting."

She shook her head. "We really must have something to show everybody," she told him. "Otherwise, they're only going to say that this is another of my nitwit publicity stunts to promote my career. It's unfair, but there it is, Wes."

"You're still figuring to make some money out of this whole mess, aren't you?"

She held up her hand in a swearing-on-the-Bible gesture. "Absolutely not. I simply want to save our lives," she insisted. "Granted that one of my essential beliefs used to be, before I mended my ways, that slogan they always put on the front of the sweepstakes envelopes—you may already be a winner. But no more, Wes, honestly."

"Going up there will be damned dangerous."

"That's why I knew you wouldn't want me to do it all alone," she said, taking him by the arm.

Heavy rain slammed at the bedroom window, a harsh wind started rattling the panes violently.

Wes sat suddenly up, awake. The bedside clock showed that it was six twenty-five A.M.

"Casey?" he said, noticing that she wasn't beside him. "Case?"

He swung out of bed, scanning the greyness that filled the early morning room. Tugging on a pair of jeans, he hurried into the living room.

She wasn't there either.

He found the note in the kitchen, written in her helter-skelter handwriting and stuck to the front of the refrigerator with a Disneyland magnet.

Wes, it said, I had second thoughts during the night and decided it was selfish and thoughtless of me to drag you along on this wild goat chase. So—

"Wild goose," he corrected.

So I'm sneaking off to do it alone. No use both of us risking our necks. Wish me luck. Love, Casey. XXX

"You nitwit," he observed, detaching the note from the door.

The phone rang in his den.

Wes spun, note clutched in his left hand, and ran for it. The phone rested on the taboret between his drawing board and his computer.

He grabbed up the receiver. "You can't go up there alone," he said.

"Go where, old buddy?" It was Filchock.

"I thought you were Casey."

"If I had time, I'd be insulted," said his writer friend. "But I have another news bulletin for you. Just heard it on the radio."

"What are you doing up this early?"

"I arise every day at this time to practice my yoga."

"Yoga?"

"Well, actually I touch my toes a few times while murmuring, 'Om.' The point is, there's been another killing."

"Who?"

"The TV guru who Casey claims was masterminding this caper."

"Alan Omony?"

"Him, yeah," answered Filchock. "His body was discovered up near Mulholland Drive in the wee hours. Dead after having been beaten and tortured."

"Jesus, Casey's gone off to—"

"Gave you the slip, did she? What

did I predict last night when you phoned to announce your plans to go into the freelance exhumation business? I suggested that your Lizzie Borden surrogate would ditch you in favor of the loot and—"

"She says she decided to go it alone to keep me out of danger."

"Sure, finding several hundred thousand dollars' worth of gems would put you in danger of leading the life of a playboy," said his friend. "Darned thoughtful of her to—"

"If those goons killed Omony, it must mean they're going to go after the jewels on their own."

"Yep, sounds like the classic situation of thieves falling out."

"They're going to try to find Casey—if they haven't already."

"You'd have noticed that."

"Maybe they got a tip that she was staying here," said Wes, worried. "Maybe they followed her when she left this morning."

"Well, get yourself up to where this movie siren is buried and—"

"I don't know where that grave is, Mike."

"How were you planning to do your bit of grave robbing if—"

"Casey had a map on a computer disk, and she was going to print out a copy before we . . ."

"I'm losing you."

Wes was staring at his computer. He'd just noticed that a disk had been left in the slot. "I'll call you back in a few minutes," he promised. "I think can get myself a copy of the map."

A moment after the rain ceased, Filchock turned off the windshield wipers in his Mercedes. Hunching

his shoulders and squinting out into the late afternoon, he said, "We ought to be reaching that side road in another few minutes."

In the passenger seat Wes again fished out the printout of the map that the late actor had drawn.

"Reisberson Road is what we want," he said after studying the map once more.

"I know that. You've mentioned the name of that turnoff full many a time since you lured me along on this lamebrain journey in the early hours of—"

"Sorry, but it's just that I'm worried about Casey. If those guys are tailing her and she's got a lead of a couple of hours on us, then—"

"We've been making good time. And it's unlikely that those thugs are driving a state-of-the-art Mercedes that they can barely afford and that their next of kin nags them about each and every day."

"All right, I won't mention the name of the road or Casey for a while," vowed Wes, gazing out at the highway and the small Northern California town they were driving through. "How's *Angel on Horseback* coming along?"

"It's not."

"I thought NBC okayed a pilot, feeling television was in need of one more show about a heavenly visitor."

"Angels per se are fine by NBC, but some of their younger execs decided that no one likes cowboys any more."

"Sounded like a dandy premise to me. An angel in the guise of a gunslinger, traveling through the Old West and—"

"As I recall, you loathed the idea."

"You're right, it sounded sort of trite to me."

"Well, we've come up with a brilliant switch, and all and sundry at the National Broadcasting Company are gaga."

"Which is?"

"*Gabriel's Gig*."

"We're talking about the Angel Gabriel?"

"The same, yes. He comes back to earth and each week sits in on trumpet with a different band, while at the same time helping some person change his or her life for the better," explained Filchock. "One week Gabe plays with a rock group, the next it's polka time, then country & western and—"

"Casey's car," cried Wes suddenly. "Back there."

Filchock slowed the auto. "At that motel we just passed?"

"Yeah, I spotted her red Toyota in the parking lot in front of the Golden Bear Inn & Motor Lodge."

"You're certain?" He pulled over to the side of the highway.

"How many red Toyotas have a 'Bertha the Biker' decal in the back window?"

"I'd guess the number was limited." As soon as there was a break in the traffic flow, Filchock executed a U-turn and drove back to the motor lodge.

They parked near Casey's car and got out.

"We'll ask the manager if she's got a room here."

"I hesitate to mention this, old buddy, but it's just possible that she's here for a rendezvous with some old beau. In which case—"

"We'll ask anyway." Frowning, Wes moved ahead of his friend and trotted across the white gravel to the rustic motel office.

There didn't seem to be anyone behind the desk. But when Wes got close to the counter and peered over it, he saw a plump bald man in a Hawaiian shirt sprawled facedown on the floor.

Very slowly, very carefully, Wes stretched up out of his cautious crouch. When his head was a few inches above the sill of the open motel cabin window, he risked a glance inside.

He heard the slap before he spotted Casey.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, rubbing her fingertips over the red splotch on her cheek. "This would be a stupid time to lie to you guys, wouldn't it?" she asked the large, wide, bald man who was leaning angrily over her.

"Just tell us the damned truth," he told her in his raspy, high-pitched voice.

There was at least one other man in the room with Casey. Wes saw part of him, stained jeans and scuffed cowboy boots. Apparently he was slouched in an armchair, watching his associate threaten the young woman.

"They'll notice you," warned Filchcock in a whisper as he tugged at Wes's coatsleeve. They were kneeling amidst the overgrown shrubbery on the muddy ground beside the cabin wall.

Wes hunched down below window level.

"She's in there," he mouthed,

pointing with his thumb. "At least two men have got her."

"But that was just, you know, fate," they heard Casey saying inside.

Turning his back on his friend, Wes raised his head a few more inches and listened.

"After all, that poor *film noir* actress was buried an awful long time ago," Casey went on.

"Why'd you turn back?" asked the bald one.

"I didn't until I realized that—"

"It was because you noticed we were following you," accused the other goon.

"Fellows, honestly, I didn't have any notion you were dogging my trail until you burst in here just now," Casey assured them. "Had I suspected a pair of thugs was trailing me, I wouldn't have checked into a roadside motel to catch a nap, would I?"

The bald one said, "Well, you're coming with us now and show us just where she's buried."

"But," said Casey, impatient, "I already explained the problem to you guys. There's a whole town there now, and Neva Maxton's impromptu grave is smack under a darn mall."

"You don't want to make us mad, the way Omony did," advised the bald man. "We know she was buried in the woods, not under a shopping plaza. That old actor told us that before—"

"Then, yes. But keep in mind that it was decades ago. Nobody can stand in the way of progress," Casey explained. "Fact is, I should have realized myself that every-

thing would've changed in all this —"

"We have to get that locket and then find out where she buried her jewels. The sooner you—"

"But I was just there," Casey said. "Once I saw the situation, I turned around and came back."

"You must've made a mistake."

"No, I used this map, Dick Barnson's map. Here, take a look at it yourself."

"Careful what you pull out of that pocket."

"Well, honestly, how could I conceal a weapon in the pocket of a pair of Levi's that are this tight? It's a wonder I could even stuff the folded map in here."

Wes was poked in the arm. Without turning, he made a stop-that gesture at Filchock.

"That wasn't me," said his friend aloud.

Wes looked back and saw a thin, bearded man in jeans and cowboy boots standing there pointing a .38 revolver at him.

"If you're going to lurk," he told Wes, "you got to be a hell of a lot quieter than you two."

"Well, I've never known her to lie," said Wes. "And Casey and I have been friends for a good long while."

Filchock made a strange sound.

The bald man scowled at him. "What's wrong with you?"

"Allergies," answered the writer. He had been made to sit in the straight-backed chair that went with the rickety writing table.

The bearded man gestured at Casey with his gun. "The only way

for us to settle this is for you to come along with us."

Wes was sitting on the bed beside her now, and she took hold of his arm. "Okay, but you're going to look awfully silly trying to dig a hole in the food court at that mall," she assured the gunman. "Besides, the security people would never let you drag in picks and shovels and—"

"Enough." He came over close to her, frowning down.

"An even bigger problem you've got," put in Wes, "is the police."

"What police?"

"The ones we phoned about fifteen minutes ago from the motel office after we found the manager out cold on the floor of—"

"You damn . . . oof!"

When he lunged to hit Wes with the barrel of his gun, Casey had suddenly kicked him in the groin.

He doubled over, groaning.

Wes straight-armed him and grabbed his gun away from him.

Filchock had, while that was going on, left his chair and tackled the bald man.

As the two of them hit the motel room floor with an echoing thunk, the door flapped open, and three local police officers came charging in.

"Better drop that gun," suggested Casey close to his ear.

"Huh?"

"Or they'll think you're a goon."

"Right." Very carefully he set the weapon on the faded rug.

When Wes got home from the animation studio the following Monday evening, his cottage was empty. He called Casey's name

anyway and, as he'd anticipated, got no answer.

But stuck to the refrigerator door was a note. "Gone again," he murmured, crossing to it.

The note, however, said only *Beach*.

He walked down to the twilight beach, and there was Casey sitting on a long, twisted chunk of driftwood and gazing out at the darkening Pacific.

"I've been doing some calculating," she announced, rising and smiling at him.

"Planning another getaway?"

"I can see where you'd still have doubts about my credibility," she admitted. "But even though my spiritual advisor turned out to be a conniving crook who got bumped off by his colleagues in crime, nevertheless, it doesn't mean his teachings were invalid."

"Okay," he said. "So what were you calculating?"

"Do you think, keeping in mind this is Southern California, that we could live pretty comfortably on a hundred fifty thousand a year?"

The surf was coming in with considerable enthusiasm, splashing foam across the damp sand.

"Did you actually find those jewels, Case?"

She gave a sigh. "Hey, the cops up there took Dick Barnson's map and went and had a look, and there really is a darned mall over the alleged gravesite, remember?"

"You're right, yes. So where's this money coming from?"

"It would be, of course, in addition to what you earn at Sparey Art," said Casey, walking closer to the water. "Anyway, Wes, this morning the publishers offered me a hundred fifty thousand to finish up Dick's autobiography. I guess that's not a really big advance, but as you mentioned, I'm really not an established author yet."

"A hundred fifty is not bad."

"Obviously, I'm no nitwit, all the publicity about poor Dick's murder and that long-ago murder and the missing jewels and all—well, it made him a much hotter topic than he was when he was alive." Bending, she took off her sandals and stepped into the foam.

"I'd estimate that with your hundred fifty and what I earn we'd survive," Wes said, following her as she walked along the edge of the sea.

"And then the HBO money could turn out to be pretty handsome."

"What HBO money?"

"They also called about maybe doing a movie about my experiences with the buried treasure and all. You'd be in the story, too. But, and that's just the way the entertainment business is, they want to focus on me rather than you."

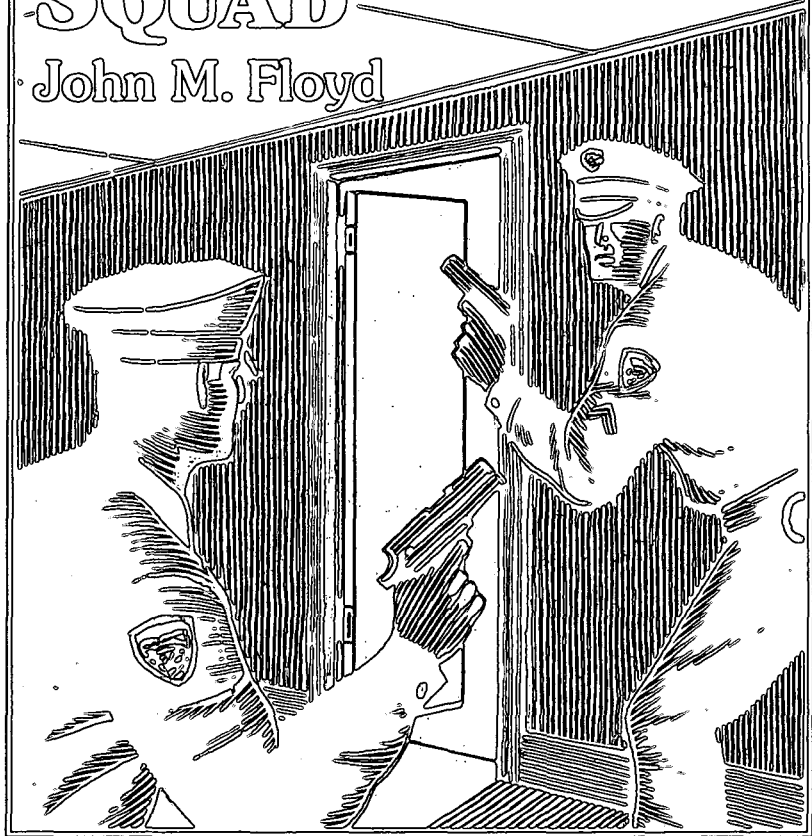
He caught up with her and took her hand. "So you're intending to stick around here for awhile?"

"I already told you that I would." Halting, she turned and looked up into his eyes. "By now, Wes, you do trust me, don't you?"

He only hesitated about five seconds before replying, "I do, sure."

THE BOMB SQUAD

John M. Floyd



“Lights,” Becker said, looking up through the windshield. “We got lights on the top floor.”

The driver, Ed Timmons, leaned forward over the steering wheel, took a quick look, and sat back again, his eyes on the road. “Oh God,” he said, and swallowed. “It’s really him, isn’t it?”

Sergeant Tom Becker was already punching numbers into his cell phone. “I hope so,” he lied. What Becker really hoped as he waited for the security guard to answer the phone was that there was a cleaning crew up there, or someone working late. But from what the guard had told him moments earlier, there was little chance of

that. Unlike the other threats and tipoffs that had flooded the police switchboards since the bomber's latest attack, this one looked as if it might be the real thing. An anonymous call had come in to headquarters only minutes ago, delivered in a voice that was as clear and chilling as its message: his next target's Remington Tower, top floor. He's there now.

Becker was leaning forward for another look at the building in question when he heard Ralph Hendrix, the security guard in the Remington lobby, pick up the phone.

"Mr. Hendrix?" Becker said. "Me again. You did say everybody on thirty-two had signed out already, right? And nobody's signed back in?" Becker paused, rubbing a hand through his crewcut as he listened. "Well, somebody's up there now, we just saw the lights come on." Another wait, and a weary nod. "Right. Well, what it means is, we don't have as much time as we'd hoped. And we're still a ways away."

Becker had a sudden thought and turned to ask the driver, "Who were those guys who called in a minute ago, from the East Side?"

Timmons frowned, most of his attention on the road. "Spellman, I think he said. Spellman and Rice."

Becker turned back to the phone. "Two men from one of the other stations are close by," he told the guard. "They should be there soon. Officers Spellman and Ri—" He stopped. "They are? Good, put one of 'em on."

As he waited, Becker glanced again at Timmons, who was cursing softly as he weaved their cruis-

er through the late-night traffic. They had at least another twenty blocks to go. The building loomed ahead of them, a black monolith topped with a single row of lights.

Becker heard a new voice come on the phone.

"Rice?" he said. "My name's Becker, from Metro. Here's what I want you to—" Becker broke off then, and spent the next thirty seconds listening and nodding. Finally he said, "Sounds good to me. We'll be there inside ten minutes." He started to break the connection, then added, "One more thing. Are you both in uniform? Yeah, us too. We don't need to be shooting each other." With that, Becker clicked the phone off and sagged back in his seat. His head had begun to throb.

"I take it he outranks you," Timmons said, swerving to pass a white limo.

"Don't know and don't care," Becker answered. "The important thing is, he's got a plan, which is more than I had." He sighed and took his pistol from his holster. As he checked its load, he saw Timmons glance at him, and was reminded of the scene from *Bullitt* when the driver of the car that Steve McQueen was chasing turned to watch his passenger stuff shells into a shotgun. It occurred to Becker that Timmons looked a lot more scared than the guy in the movie.

"Rice said he and Spellman were just down the street when they heard the call," Becker explained. "He's already studied the floor layout and talked with the guard. Apparently there are two elevators on the east end of the building and

stairwells east and west. The top floor—the one that's lit up—is thirty-two. He and Spellman want to take one of the elevators to thirty-one, send it back down, and go up the stairs to the top floor. They'll lock the stairwell door there, then go back down to thirty-one, down the hallway to the west end of the building, back up to thirty-two, and wait outside that stairwell door until we call them. They don't have a cell phone, but they're taking one of the guard's radios and a set of keys to the offices."

Timmons seemed to think that over. "Four people," he said, "from two different stations. We don't know them, they don't know us, and none of us know what we might find up there." He shook his head. "You sure we can go in this way, without more backup?"

"The only thing we can't do," Becker answered, holstering his gun, "is let this jerk plant his bomb and get away again. Okay?"

Timmons said nothing. His face was grim, his eyes locked on the street ahead.

"It's a smart plan, Eddie," Becker said. "This'll save time. Spellman and Rice'll be in place outside the door on the other end of the hallway by the time we get there. We can go in from both sides."

Though he still didn't reply, the driver seemed to accept that, and Becker turned again to stare out the window. He found himself wondering why in the hell this had to happen now, on his last night of crossover duty. Becker's normal job was at a desk at headquarters, where the only danger was getting

poisoned by the coffee. To make matters worse, this was the night of the commissioner's roast, which meant a big chunk of their workforce was ten miles away, fidgeting in their chairs in the Hilton ballroom. The backup Becker had requested might take awhile.

"I heard you ask dispatch about the tipoff," Timmons said, interrupting his thoughts. "What'd they tell you?"

"Not much. Male caller, sounded young, sounded white, thumping noises in the background."

"Thumping?"

"That's what they said. We'll listen to it afterward."

"I hope so," Timmons murmured, looking worried.

Becker was pondering that comment when the car screeched to a stop in front of the Remington Building. In the blink of an eye both he and Timmons were out of the cruiser and heading for the door, where they were met by an overweight guard in a rumpled tan uniform. His nametag said R. HENDRIX; his face said he was scared half to death. Smart man, Becker thought.

"The other two guys should be in place soon," the guard told them as they crossed the echoing lobby. He sounded out of breath. "They sent the elevator back down two minutes ago."

The floorplan was still spread out on Hendrix's desk, near the elevator. While Timmons wrung his hands, Becker studied the layout, stopping every few seconds to fire questions at the guard.

"Any other exits?" he asked.

"Just the elevator and the two sets of stairs."

"Roof access?"

"Only from the stairwells."

"Outside fire escapes?"

"No. The windows don't open. If you go out, you go down."

"What about lights?"

"On that floor? One switch, near the elevator. Controls the hallway and all the offices." When Becker looked surprised, Hendrix added, "I knew a guy who worked up there years ago. The offices used to be a bunch of open cubicles with partitions. The wiring never got changed."

"Well," Becker murmured. "At least nobody'll be hiding in the shadows." He chewed his lip a moment, his mind working. "What about noise this time of night?" he asked.

The guard frowned. "Pardon?"

"How noisy is it on thirty-two? Fans, generators, piped-in music?"

"Just the air conditioning. It's a big unit."

"It's loud?"

"Kind of a rumble. You know."

"Can it be turned off from up there?"

"Don't think so. Another throw-back to earlier times. Some of the top floors used to have computer gear that had to stay cool. It's controlled centrally from somewhere."

"Okay." Becker stared at the plans, still thinking. "Right now I need you here, Mr. Hendrix, but later I may phone you to go find the a/c and switch it off. Understood?"

As the guard nodded, Timmons cleared his throat. "Excuse me, sarge," he said, his voice shaky, "but it seems to me—well, we might want a little noise up there, while

we're poking around. If we can't hear him, maybe he won't hear us."

Becker glanced up from the floor-plan. "That's not what I'm talking about. We might need to listen for sounds that he wouldn't."

"What kind of sounds?"

Instead of answering, Becker turned to the guard. "Where's your other set of keys?"

Hendrix held out a ring of about fifty. "Office numbers are written on 'em."

"No master key?"

"Not any more. All the locks were changed last week after some folks left the firm."

"What kind of sounds?" Timmons asked again.

Becker looked him in the eye as he clipped the key ring to his belt. "Ticking sounds," he said.

Their gazes held for a second longer, then Becker scribbled a number on a desk pad and handed it to the guard. "Use your phone to contact me but only if you have to. And when you see us reach thirty-two—" he pointed to the floor indicator above the elevator doors "—call Spellman and Rice on their radio. Tell them to wait five seconds, then go in. Timmons and I'll enter from this end of the hall. I'll send our elevator back down, and you hold it here along with the other one. Okay?"

Becker waited for Hendrix to nod, then turned and headed for the elevator. Timmons followed, his face as pale as chalk.

"Good luck," the guard called as the doors closed behind them.

In the elevator Becker checked

his gear. Service revolver, cell phone, cuffs, flashlight. The light was probably unnecessary tonight, but he was glad he had it along. He wished he had a shotgun.

He glanced at his partner, who still looked a little green around the gills. "You okay?" Becker said.

Timmons swallowed and kept his eyes straight ahead, staring at nothing. "What do you think it would feel like?" he asked.

Becker regarded him a moment. Timmons was leaning back against the wall of the elevator car, beads of sweat glistening on his cheeks and forehead. "What would what feel like?"

"An explosion," Timmons said. "I've heard that when it happens you don't feel, or hear, a thing. You think that's true?"

Becker shook his head. "We're not going to get blown up, Eddie. Not tonight anyway." He raised his eyes and looked at the floor numbers on the display panel as the car rose. "For one thing our experts say this guy—if it's really him—is careful. He works slow. And since we know he's been here less than fifteen minutes—we saw the lights come on ourselves, remember—he probably hasn't had time to arm and plant anything yet." Becker paused, watching the numbers change. They were at the nineteenth floor and climbing.

"The second thing is, even if he has already hidden it, we've got at least eight hours to find the damn thing. This dude's ego is probably as big as Bigfoot; he'll go for max headlines and max casualties. No way he'd set it to blow before the

morning crowds arrive for work." Becker took a breath and let it out slowly, still watching the display. Twenty-seven . . . twenty-eight . . . twenty-nine . . .

"So if you want to worry about something, Eddie my man, worry about getting shot. Better yet, worry about me getting shot."

As Becker spoke the words, the elevator car slowed. The red number thirty-two appeared on the display and stayed there. Becker heard a ding, then a moment of total silence.

The doors opened.

The top floor was one long, narrow hallway with office doors lining both sides. Guns drawn, Becker and Timmons stepped out into the corridor. Becker held the elevator car until he saw the two uniformed figures at the far end of the hall more than a hundred yards away; then he leaned back into the elevator, pressed "1," and came out again as the doors sighed shut. He heard the car start its long trip back down. Timmons acknowledged the two colleagues with an upraised hand, and Becker saw one of the figures bend down to lock the stairwell door on their end.

Well, that's that, Becker thought. All the exits were now sealed.

He took a moment to look around. From where he stood he had a clear view of everything in the hallway. All the lights were in fact on, there were no obstructing objects like file cabinets or water coolers or potted palms, and the only break in the corridor was at this end, where it widened a bit to include a recep-

tionist's area complete with desk, computer, and telephone. There was no place to hide. Whoever else was here—if he was here at all—had to be in one of the offices.

Okay, Becker thought. Here goes. Another glance down the hall told him the other cops were already unlocking office doors and venturing inside. Signaling Timmons to stand by, he unclipped the ring from his belt, found the key to the first office on his right—3201—and turned it in the lock. The door swung open.

Becker crept inside. The office was large and cluttered. Plenty of hiding places here. While Timmons stayed put just inside the open door, Becker did a quick search. Nobody home. Before leaving he took a look through the tall window at the end of the room. At first he was puzzled: the entire city block below him, just behind and to the north of the building, was pitch black—no lights, no people, no anything. Then he saw perimeter lighting and a chain-link fence and, as he looked more carefully, the deep pit with heavy equipment parked at the bottom. Construction site.

Satisfied, he turned and went back to the hallway. "One down," he whispered as he moved past his partner. He doubted whether Timmons had heard him; the guard, as it turned out, had been right about the air conditioning. It made a deep, steady rumble that seemed to come from everywhere at once, with an occasional knock or rattle thrown in. Becker couldn't imagine having to listen to it all day long. If it did come down to a search for the device, the bomb squad

would definitely have to get the a/c shut off first.

Slowly they worked their way down the corridor, checking rooms on both their left and right; 3202 was a restroom, and 3203 contained only a copier and a fax machine. The rest were offices. Ten minutes after starting out, while they were searching room 3208, the air conditioning cut off—or at least cycled down. The resulting silence was even more unsettling than the noise had been.

That was when they heard the shots.

Two of them, one right after the other. A second later, the crash of breaking glass. The sounds had come from the other end of the hall.

Both Timmons and Becker froze for an instant, then eased out into the hallway. Resisting the impulse to hurry, Becker flattened himself against a wall and waited for several seconds, his heart pounding and his gun sweaty in his hand. Finally he nodded to Timmons, who was trying to make himself small on the other side of the corridor. They both moved forward.

As they approached the west end of the floor, Becker saw that the five farthest office doors were open. He assumed that whatever had happened had happened behind the nearest door, since the other team would have started its search at the stairwell and come this way. Having heard no more noises, he and Timmons stopped just outside the door of 3246, cocked their revolvers, and waited a moment.

If one of the cops had just been trigger-happy and then knocked

over a lamp, Becker said to himself, we're all going to feel like fools.

Oddly enough, when he followed his gun around the corner and into the open doorway, the first thing he saw was a broken lamp lying in the middle of the room—but beyond that was a broken window, and on the floor beside the window was the sprawled body of a policeman. Off to the right, on the far side of a wooden desk, a second cop was looking through an open briefcase. He jerked upright when he saw Becker and Timmons; then all three relaxed.

Becker lowered his gun, his mind racing with a combination of relief and confusion.

Where was the suspect?

As he stood there dumbfounded, Timmons brushed past him to check on the fallen officer.

"He's dead," said the second man, who had immediately resumed his search of the briefcase. Becker studied him a moment. The man's shirttail was out, his hat was off, and his blue nametag said SPELLMAN in white block letters. He continued with the briefcase for several seconds, then closed the lid and pushed it away in frustration. "The bomb's here somewhere," he added. "We surprised him."

As Timmons rose from the body, Becker walked to it, knelt, and looked at the nametag above the shirt pocket. RICE. Though he hadn't known the man, Becker still felt a lump in his throat. He had, after all, spoken to him on the phone twenty minutes ago. After a pause Becker waved his gun barrel at the window. "That where he went?"

Spellman nodded. Though his voice had been fairly steady, his face was pale, his hands trembling.

Becker and Timmons exchanged glances; then Becker rose to his feet, holstered his pistol, and looked through the broken window. There was no construction site on this side of the building; when he leaned out the window, he looked down on a lighted city street. Thirty-two floors below, a crumpled figure lay on the sidewalk, surrounded by a growing crowd. For a second it looked as if the body might be wearing tennis clothes. Becker quickly dismissed that thought, blaming his poor eyesight. It was night after all, and the sidewalk was a long way down.

When he turned again to face the room, he saw Timmons helping Spellman to a chair. Watching them, Becker took out his cell phone and called Hendrix in the lobby. He told him the situation, then put the phone away and approached Officer Spellman. The man's eyes were glassy and vacant.

"What happened?" Becker asked him as gently as he could. He was vaguely aware that the air conditioner had come on again.

"He killed Rice," Spellman said in a monotone. "He killed him, then took a shot at me. I jumped behind the desk there."

"You sure you're not hit?"

Spellman blinked, then ran a hand over his chest and stomach in a gesture that would have been comical under other circumstances. "I don't think so."

"No struggle?"

"No time."

"What happened next?" Becker said.

Spellman motioned with a lift of his chin. "He went through the window."

Becker frowned. "Isn't that safety glass?" he asked, studying the jagged hole.

"Beats me. He just put his head down and rammed through." Spellman swallowed and said, "I never saw anything like it."

"Okay, you just rest a minute." Becker picked up the cell phone and punched numbers. "Hendrix? Free up one of the elevators, we've got a man coming down. Any sign of the bomb squad? . . . Well, when they do, send 'em up, quick. And see if you can kill that a/c, we've got a search to do here."

He signed off and turned to Officer Spellman. "You go on down to the lobby, sport. I'll tell your people you did good."

The cop nodded dazedly but made no move to get up.

"You need some help?" Timmons asked him.

Spellman blinked, then focused on him and said in a faint voice, "No. No, I can make it. Thanks, guys." He rose unsteadily to his feet, took a breath, and made his way out the door. Moments later Becker heard the elevator ding at the other end of the hall.

"What about the body?" Timmons asked.

Together they turned to look at Officer Rice lying dead on the floor ten feet away.

"He'll get a hero's burial," Becker said. "But right now we've got work to do."

Both of them took a deep breath and directed their attention to the office. It was pretty much in order except for the floor on the left-hand side of the room, which was strewn with books and boxes apparently taken from a line of storage bins and shelves along that wall. It was clear that the two other cops had indeed interrupted the bomber as he was preparing a place to plant the device.

"Spellman was right," Timmons murmured, looking at the items scattered about on the carpet. "The bomb's here somewhere."

Becker nodded agreement. But something was nagging at him, something at the back of his mind.

"We should have a while, though," Timmons was saying. A drop of perspiration ran onto his eye, and he brushed it away with the back of his hand. "Like you said, it'd be set for the morning rush hour, right?"

Even as Timmons spoke, Becker noticed the lamp again. The lamp worried him. If there had been no struggle, why was it broken? Had the suspect knocked it over in his dive through the window?

The cell phone rang. Timmons waited for Becker to answer it and, when he didn't, answered it himself.

Becker was still staring at the fallen lamp. Not only was it broken, it was unplugged. Unplugged and lying in the middle of the floor. Becker frowned and concentrated, letting his eyes sweep the room. The open bins, cluttered shelves, carpet, window, walls—

"It's the chief, sarge," Timmons said.

Becker's gaze stopped on two small holes in the wall just above the baseboard, beside the window. He walked over to examine them. They were bullet holes, spaced no more than an inch apart.

Bullet holes?

"Sarge," Timmons said again. "The chief wants to talk to—"

Becker squeezed his eyes shut, searching his memory. Whatever was nagging at him had been there since they first entered the room and found the dead officer. And something else, too, something Spellman had told them . . .

His eyes snapped open.

The shirttail. There hadn't been a struggle, yet Spellman's shirttail was all the way out and his hat missing. It was as if he had not yet finished dressing. And the body on the sidewalk, decked out in what looked like tennis whites—

My God, Becker thought.

Without even looking at Timmons, Becker reached out and snatched the phone from his hand. "Chief?" he said.

"What the hell's going on up there?" Chief Wellborn demanded. He was outside; Becker could hear traffic noises in the background. "I got a dead body on the sidewalk, and the guard here says there's another one up—"

"Let me speak to him," Becker snapped.

The chief, who was not accustomed to being interrupted, said, "Now, just a minute, sergeant—"

"The security guard," Becker shouted, his face red. "Put him on!"

After a short pause the guard's voice came on the line.

"Mr. Hendrix, this is Tom Becker. I want you to look at the dead man's face."

"Look at his . . . I can't. His arm's in the way—"

"Then move his arm! Look at his face, and tell me if you recognize him."

A long silence passed.

"Hendrix?"

Still no reply. But Becker could hear him breathing into the phone.

"Mr. Hendrix?"

"I see him," the guard answered, in a strange voice. "I see his face now . . ."

"It's one of the two cops, isn't it," Becker said.

He heard the guard swallow. "Yessir, it is. It's the other one, the one who didn't talk to you on the phone. Spellman." Hendrix paused, then murmured, "Why's he in his underwear? There's a pile of clothes lying way over there, bundled up and tied with a pants leg . . ."

"Mr. Hendrix, listen to me a minute." Becker's eyes were shut again as he spoke. "The man I told you was coming down in the elevator. Did you see him get off?"

The guard hesitated. "I didn't see him, no, but I'm sure he's down by now. By the way, I got a maintenance guy working on cutting off the a/c, and there's a bunch of cops on the way up to you right now."

"The bomb squad?"

"No, just cops. From all over."

"Great," Becker mumbled. "Put the chief back on."

When the phone had been handed over, Becker said, "Chief, we've got some trouble here. The body in front of you is a cop from an East

Side station. The bomber shot him and his partner, too, and got away. We need to get the explosives team up here on the double, and we need to put out a call to all units, with the following description . . . ”

He spoke a moment more, listened, nodded, and signed off. Then he turned to Ed Timmons, who looked a bit like a business student who had just wandered by mistake into a class on quantum physics.

“He changed clothes,” Becker explained. “After they surprised him, he put Spellman’s uniform on and threw him out the window.”

Timmons swallowed. “So . . . he shot both of them?”

“Looks that way.” Becker’s eyes roamed the room again, clicking off each item even as he spoke. “I imagine he shot Rice first, then swapped clothes with Spellman before shooting him. That’s why there was no blood on the uniform.”

“But we heard the shots. They were close together—”

Becker pointed to the two bullet holes in the wall. “Those were the shots we heard. I figure he used a silencer to kill the partners, then used Spellman’s gun to put two rounds into that baseboard later, just so we would hear them, to back up his story. Then he used the floor lamp to smash the window and threw Spellman’s body out.”

Timmons still looked lost. “To back up his story? Why’d he need a story? How did he know about you and me at all?”

“I imagine he got that out of Spellman, during the change of clothes. There’d have been plenty of time.”

Timmons thought that over, then said, “Okay. Okay, if that’s what happened . . . then there’s still plenty of time for us, too, right? We have till morning to find it. That’s what you said.”

“I know what I said.”

“Then why do you look so worried?” Timmons’ face had gone very still. “If that’s true, why do you keep wanting the bomb squad to hurry up and get here?”

Becker turned to look at him. “Because there’s a chance I’m wrong.”

“What do you mean, wrong?”

“The lights,” Becker said. “That’s been bothering me from the start. Why would he announce himself that way, turning on all the lights? Why not just use a flashlight? Was he arrogant? Was he careless?”

“Maybe he’s just stupid.”

“No. I don’t think so. Arrogant, maybe. Insane, probably. But careless, or stupid? No.”

“Then what’s the answer?” Timmons asked. “Why the lights?”

“What do you think?”

Timmons pondered that. He seemed to be having trouble getting his breath. “To get us here in a hurry?”

“That’s what I’m thinking now.”

“But . . . why?”

Becker just shook his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I think it means we better find that thing, just as quick as we can.”

As he spoke, the air conditioning sputtered and bumped one final time and then clicked off. “At last,” Becker said.

Timmons had already begun looking through the litter on the

floor and in the shelves, and Becker was crossing the room to join him when another thought struck him.

The briefcase.

He turned to look at it, recalling the way the man in Spellman's uniform had it open, its contents hidden from their view, when he and Timmons arrived on the scene. Becker felt a sudden chill ripple down his spine.

Had that been an act? Had the suspect just been going through the motions, pretending to search the case in order to convince them that he was who he appeared to be? Or had he been doing something else entirely?

Like setting a timer.

No, Becker thought, his mind racing. He wouldn't have waited that late to set it, even if he had been surprised by Rice and Spellman. The scattered contents of the shelves was a good indication that at the time he was interrupted he had been about to hide the bomb, not to arm it. That would surely have already been done.

But what had he been doing with the briefcase?

Becker approached the desk. As Timmons turned to watch him in the eerie stillness of the now-silent room, he took a deep breath, held it, and placed his ear against the side of the case.

It was ticking.

Becker's heart lurched.

The bomb was in the briefcase.

And at that moment it all came together. The truth hit him like a slap in the face.

The bomber hadn't been setting

the bomb's timer; he'd been resetting it.

Keeping his head down and motionless, Becker raised his eyes to meet his partner's. He opened his mouth to tell Timmons to alert the others, to warn them away, but it was too late. Even now Becker could hear the footsteps of a dozen cops in the corridor. And all of them, he realized, were about to be killed. He and Timmons and the men in the hall and heaven knew how many more in the street below.

Because they were out of time.

Becker knew it; he could feel it in his bones. The bomber had already been gone for almost ten minutes, and the timer wouldn't have been reset for a minute more than the man thought it would take him to fake his grief and get out of the building. He would want all the witnesses to go up with the blast.

At the very instant that all this was flashing through Becker's mind, one of the policemen stuck his head through the doorway and looked in at him and Timmons.

"You guys the bomb squad?" the man asked.

Becker straightened up, his heart pounding in his chest. "We are now," he answered, half to himself. In the same tone of voice he said with a glance at the new cop, "Get away from that door. All of you, lie down in the hall and *stay there*." To Timmons, whose face showed he knew, Becker murmured, "Be ready. You'll have to get the window."

Timmons hesitated, then understood. He stepped back as Becker drew his pistol and fired through the open doorway, four shots, his

bullets shredding the lock on the door across the hall. Timmons was already moving, dashing out and across the hallway, lowering his shoulder and crashing through the ruined door of 3245. At the same moment, his ears ringing, Becker dropped his gun, picked the briefcase up by the handle, and ran after him. As Becker passed through the doorway and crossed the hall, he had a glimpse of a corridor full of cops, all of them lying on the floor and staring up at him with wide, frightened eyes.

Not as frightened as I am, he thought.

In the office across the hall Timmons had snatched up a heavy chair and slammed it through the window as Becker charged through the open door. Now the window was open as well, a gaping hole in the center of the glass. While Timmons dived out of the way Becker made a full three hundred sixty degree windup and flung the briefcase out and through the jagged hole and into space. It spun away into the black night like an oversized Frisbee.

Becker didn't stop to watch its descent into the construction pit behind the building. He hit the floor three feet from his partner and folded both arms over his head, waiting.

Four seconds passed. Five . . . six . . . seven . . .

The explosion rocked the building and blew out what was left of the office window. It also, though they did not yet know it, blew out all the other windows on that side of Remington Tower. Most of the

cops in the hallway, some of them hardened veterans, cried out like kids in a thunderstorm.

When the rumble finally died down, Ed Timmons raised his head and brushed a dusting of glass fragments from his hair.

"I was half right," he said. "I didn't feel a thing."

Two hours later both of them were still in the building. They had been debriefed in the lobby by both the chief and their captain and had spoken at various times to the mayor, the police commissioner, three TV reporters, two journalists, and a pair of constipated-looking agents from the FBI. What little feedback they had received so far indicated that there were, incredibly, no reported casualties and no serious damage to the building itself. Most of the force of the blast had been absorbed, as Becker had hoped it would be, by the earthen and stone walls of the thirty-foot-deep pit.

To the casual observer, however, the scene was one of a first-class disaster. Policemen and city officials and newspeople were everywhere, and Becker was amazed at the sheer number of firemen the city had been able to produce on short notice. Outside, especially in the streets immediately surrounding the building and the construction site, was a blinking logjam of squad cars and ambulances and television vans. Inside, at least in the area immediately surrounding Becker and Timmons, things had—for the moment—actually quieted down a bit. It was the first time since the explosion that the two

men had a chance to say much to each other.

"Well," Timmons observed, his eyes twinkling. "Looks like you saved the day."

Becker gave him a glum look. "Two cops dead and nobody in custody, I'd say the day wasn't all that saved."

"Not according to the chief. He's saying you're a hero. And me, too." He paused, then added, "I like the me part."

Becker couldn't help smiling. "Well, if the governor calls, you can talk to him."

Becker could still hear the sound of sirens outside, though he couldn't for the life of him think of a practical reason for it at this point, two hours after the fact. He finally decided the sirens were going simply because big things had been happening, and it was a shame to have a siren and let it go to waste on a night like this.

"He was setting it, wasn't he?" Timmons said. "When we came in, I mean."

Becker nodded tiredly. "Changing the settings, most likely. To give him time to get away."

"So we were just lucky."

"That's right."

After a brief silence Timmons said, "At least we stopped him, sarge. At least it didn't go off tomorrow morning, like you said it might, and kill a thousand people."

Becker shook his head. "I was wrong about that, Eddie. He never intended it to go off tomorrow morning."

"But . . . what you said made sense. Max casualties—"

"Oh, he wanted casualties all right. He was just after a different kind."

Timmons just stared at him, waiting.

"You saw me go over there and use that phone a while ago, right? To call in?"

Timmons nodded.

"I called the dispatcher," Becker told him. "I got to thinking about what you said in the car, about the tipoff call. So I asked the guy at dispatch to replay the tape of the call while I listened in." Becker paused long enough to touch a finger to the bandage over his left eye. He had taken a few minor cuts from the explosion.

"Remember the thumping noise they said they heard in the background?" Becker continued. "Well, as it turned out, I recognized it. It was a kind of a rough hum, with a whump and a rattle thrown in every now and then."

Timmons looked a little puzzled, then blinked. "The air conditioner," he said.

Becker nodded.

"You mean . . . the call came from here?"

"More than that."

Timmons frowned again. After a moment his face cleared. "It was him," he said, in an awed voice. "He was the one who called."

"He had to be. It came from here, and he was here."

"But . . . why?"

"He was reeling us in like we said before. First he called to tip us off, then he waited a bit and turned on the lights to make sure we got the message. He knew the bulk of the

force was out tonight at the roast, and he knew that meant it'd take the police longer to get here and also longer, probably, to locate the bomb once we did get here. The idea of hiding it in the briefcase, by the way, was a nice touch."

"I still don't follow you," Timmons said.

"I think he knew we'd think we had plenty of time to look for it. I think he set it, the first time, not for the morning rush but for right about now, give or take an hour, so he'd get as many cops as he could. Maybe even the bomb squad itself."

"And then we showed up."

"Right. And he figured he'd better move the schedule up a bit and reset it to give himself just enough time to get clear."

Timmons shrugged. "Okay, so we saved a dozen people instead of a thousand. I'm not picky."

Becker barely heard him. He realized he was about as tired as he had ever been in his life. As he looked around the lobby, he caught a glimpse of Ralph Hendrix talking into three microphones at the same time.

After a pause Timmons spoke up again. "That brings up one more question," he said. "Why'd he get surprised in the first place? If he'd done all this planning, why'd he take so long to do what he was doing?"

Becker sighed. "I've been puzzling over that," he agreed. "I think what happened was, he hid somewhere in the building until after everyone left, then went up the stairs to thirty-two and made the tiptoff call from the receptionist's

desk. He waited a bit, cut the lights on, and went into a random office, where he planned to hide the briefcase and then get out again, fast, before the cavalry arrived. Which he could have—should have—been able to do, with no problem."

"Except—"

"Except for the keys."

Once again Timmons stared at him.

"Hendrix told us all the locks had recently been changed, remember? I don't think the bomber knew that. I figure he had a master key that was old and would no longer work. When he found that out, it was too late—he was reduced to having to pick the lock, which took him a while. Meantime, enter Timmons and Becker."

"And Spellman and Rice," Timmons said quietly.

"Yeah."

Timmons asked, frowning, "Why 3246?"

"What?"

"Why'd he pick that particular office? He was in a hurry, right? If he had a master key, and he could pick any room he wanted, why pick one at the opposite end of the hall from the phone and light switch?"

Becker frowned. That hadn't occurred to him. "Go on," he said.

"I don't think he had a master key," Timmons said, his brow furrowed. "You were right about the lock-change delaying him, but I think he had an office key. I think he had a key just for room 3246."

"You mean he had an accomplice?" Becker could see his point. "That's possible. We could check and see whose office that is—"

"Whose it was," Timmons corrected. "Our theory is that the key didn't work, remember? I'll bet we'll find that whoever used to be in 3246 was one of the people Hendrix said left the firm."

Slowly Becker nodded. "Not bad, Eddie. Not bad at all."

Timmons shrugged, looking embarrassed. "Well, we'd better have a few leads, right? I realize we've got a description and prints, which is more than we had before, but he did get away. And if he's gone to ground . . ."

Becker nodded. "Then he could still be hard for you to catch."

"You mean for us to catch."

"No, I mean you, Eddie." Becker fetched a sigh. "I'm getting too old for this. Come tomorrow, I'll be back to being a desk sergeant, and —"

"Nobody'll have to catch him, gentlemen," a voice behind them said. They both turned to look at Chief Wellborn, who had walked up without their noticing him. "One of the firemen just found this, out back." He held out a hand, and what they saw in his palm was a blue police nametag. It was blackened and warped, with almost an inch missing off one end, but the lettering on it was perfectly clear.

"Spellman," Timmons murmured.

The chief nodded. "Your suspect ran, but he ran the wrong way. He must've gone out back and climbed

down into the construction site, thinking he'd sit out the show at a safe distance and still have a good view, I guess. The body—what was left of it—was found hidden behind a bulldozer in a back corner of the pit." The chief shook his head. "Talk about bad decisions . . ."

Becker swallowed, his eyes still riveted to the nameplate. He couldn't quite believe it. The bomber was dead, killed by his own bomb. Maybe there was justice in the world after all.

After the chief had left them to report this latest news to the media, Becker stood up, ran a hand through his hair, and stretched. "Hold the fort, partner," he said. "I need to get some air."

"Not yet," Timmons said, nodding toward the other side of the lobby. A young fellow in a business suit was hurrying toward them with a cell phone, his eyes fixed on Tom Becker. He looked excited.

"You Sergeant Becker?" the young man whispered, as he drew closer.

"That's me," Becker whispered back.

The young man thrust the phone at him, holding it with both hands like a sword. "It's the governor," he hissed.

Becker turned to Timmons. "Eddie?" he said. "It's for you."

He was still smiling as he walked out the door.

FICTION

AN INGRAFT OF EVIL



James Lincoln Warren

These were decadent days, thought Dr. Tindle. The seed of mankind had not run true, and abominations abounded. Aquae Sulis this town had once been called: the Waters of Minerva, in dedication to the virgin goddess of righteous war. And now? It was simply and ludicrously Bath, as if it were some licentious Turkish bagnio filled to the brim with idleness, sin, and frivolity.

Where once brave Roman legions had used the mineral waters to harden their bodies for battle against the brutish Picts and Scots, where centurions and cohorts purified themselves by flushing the effluvia of death and corruption from their skins, now rakehells and whores revelled in disease, and silken-clad ponces traipsed effeminately to the strains of minuets, bobbing and smiling at bare-bosomed harlots bedizened with towers of silver-painted hair.

But the trumpet would sound soon! By his own calculations, assisted by scripture and signs, Dr. Tindle had fixed the First Day as December 22, 4227 B.C. The Seventh Millennium was nearly at hand! Judgment would descend at dawn, this December 22, 1773, barely a month hence, and the world would feel the wrath of the Lord of Lords.

"Confutatis maledictus flammis acribus addictus, voca me cum benedictus!" he muttered, scowling below his full-bottomed wig and turning aside so that no one would hear him—the street was crowded, and it was a bright autumn day, the sky blazing azure above them—

When the damned are confounded and tossed into the acrid fire, call me with the blessed!

Oh, the damned would rue the day! But he, John Tindle, would be among the elect! Was he not the agent of God?

He patted his coat pocket where the vial of variolus rested. It was a new word for an old scourge, but he approved of its stately Latin rhythm—much more dread-sounding than the prosaic *smallpox*.

Was he not the Avenger?

Captain Magnus Gunn was at sea after a long stint ashore, and although he was delighted to be going to New York, where there was need for firm hands to control the stubborn colonists, his beautiful wife Charlotte was in a morose state. His absence meant giving up the residence in town, at least for the next several months, and adieu to the amusements of Drury Lane, Ranelagh, and the Pantheon. And there was the unfinished project of being invited to Almack's—it might now never come to fruition!

And for what? Her father's dull house in Exeter?

Alan Treviscoe noted without seeming to do so (it was his way) that the barbs she customarily hurled in his direction had lost much of their force. He had grown very skilled in the last few years at hiding his thoughts behind a pensive and languid face, a useful talent in his peculiar profession as an indagator of frauds against the assurance men at Lloyd's. It was particularly useful when he found himself in the company of Mrs. Gunn.

The bond between them was a strange one, he thought, sitting on one of the remaining chairs and watching the handsome harpy tyrannize the laborers who were engaged in packing her most precious belongings. Although she and he mutually despised one other, they were united in their regard for her absent husband and in ties of affection for the remainder of her family, the Merwoods.

And of course, there was the simple fact that Magnus had asked Treviscoe to "watch over my lady." A more unwelcome commission than most, however expected, but he was honor-bound to accept it with all due vigilance.

"Alan," Charlotte said suddenly, her voice uncharacteristically sweet—she almost never called him by his Christian name—"I've had a most happy inspiration."

"Indeed?"

"I think you should take me to Bath—'tis fashionable this time of the year, and the expense will not be so great as in London. I have it in mind to visit with my Aunt Phelps, although there can be no question of my joining the household—but it is conveniently nearby Exeter, so there can be no quarrel to be expected from my father. He would want me to maintain myself in appropriate style, being the wife of a king's officer, don't you agree? He can't find fault with that argument, certainly."

Treviscoe wanted to say that even the direct Dr. Merwood would think twice before crossing his formidable eldest daughter and so she was right on that account, but dis-

cretion prevailed. "If you wish to be escorted thither, I shall only be too delighted to oblige."

"Hero shall have to come, too, shan't he? I do wish you'd allow me the use of him until I can find my own domestics."

Treviscoe frowned. Her dismissal of the idea of lodging with her aunt could only be due to said aunt's unexceptional social status; Mr. Phelps, if memory served, was a well-to-do yeoman farmer, not what one would consider a country squire. Hero, Treviscoe's personal manservant and amanuensis, was of African extraction, and Treviscoe was aware that the presence of a black servant would confer a certain prestige upon Charlotte's household in accord with the prevailing taste. It would do no good to point out that his relationship with Hero was based more on mutual esteem than on the exigencies of *ton*, so he weighed his words carefully.

"In spite of his situation, Mrs. Gunn, Hero is very much his own man, performing service at his own will, and not beholden unto me in any way," he replied, "although should you wish to engage him temporarily for the purpose you suggest, you have my permission to present such a proposal to him."

"That's as good as settled, then," she purred, apparently insensitive to what he had just said.

"Will you invite Miss Merwood to join you?" he asked suddenly. He had put his finger on the one weakness in her plan: she could hardly be expected to take up residence in Bath alone.

"Yes," she said slowly, her large

blue eyes narrowing. "Yes, I suppose I must do." She was aware of her sister Elizabeth's and Treviscoe's partiality for one another, and she resented being outmaneuvered.

Treviscoe smiled complacently.

"It's the lancet that's needed here, Dr. Tindle," whispered Mr. Willard Labbett, surgeon. He spoke in hushed terms of respect, his speech only mildly slurred by gin. For whatever reason, the Oxford-educated physician had enlisted Labbett as his medical factotum, and Labbett was flattered that the natural enmity between a university-trained physician and a mere surgeon had been suspended. Dr. Tindle even condescended to ask Labbett's opinion! "Your emetics are very well, but I've never seen a better case for bleeding. There's the fever and all."

Dr. Tindle looked down at the flushed girl child and hid his distaste. The child was a beauty by any standards. The impending doom of mankind would prevent her accession to tempting womanhood, but he already felt her stirring his baser nature.

"The lancet by all means, Mr. Labbett."

His face grimacing with a suppressed grin, Labbett unfolded his tools. "We shall be needing a bowl for the bloodletting."

Dr. Tindle placed his hand gently on Labbett's arm.

"I should be honored if you would use my instrument for the purpose, Mr. Labbett. It is of the finest Greenwich steel, and superior, I think, to your own."

"I am the one who should be honored, sir!"

Dr. Tindle smiled wisely. "Our combined skills are surely required in this case, Mr. Labbett. Together, we shall see the child through."

He turned to the fretting mother. "With the help of God, Mrs. Phelps, a resolution to this crisis shall be forthcoming."

Mrs. Phelps wiped away her tears with a stained handkerchief. "Please, doctor, save young Lucy! If only my brother were here! He, like you, is a man of medicine."

Tindle frowned. Her brother a medical man? Perhaps it would be dangerous to proceed. But what of the clarion call of Gabriel? Tindle frowned more deeply. It would not do to be found wanting at the Judgment. God's will be done.

"I promise you, Mrs. Phelps, that I shall do everything in my power."

Their arrival in Bath was marred by the news that Charlotte's little cousin, Lucy Phelps, had died of the smallpox. The child had been inoculated, but the prophylaxis had developed unchecked into the disease in spite of the attendance of a physician. Treviscoe got no comfort from funerals but could think of no graceful way to avoid accompanying Charlotte.

The Merwoods had arrived from Exeter in time for the solemn procession. Treviscoe found himself next to Dr. Erasmus Merwood in the train following the catafalque. The coffin in the long black carriage looked pathetically small.

"Tis a most unfortunate occurrence, the death of such a well-dis-

positioned child," remarked Dr. Merwood. "I told my sister the girl was too young for inoculation, but she would not listen and now Lucy is gone. I must confess to not having a very high opinion of Dr. Tindle's judgment in this matter. He should have known it was too soon."

"But there is always an attendant risk in the procedure, is there not?" asked Treviscoe. "Even full-fledged adults may succumb, or so I have been led to believe."

"Aye, that is true, but 'tis a far lesser risk than braving the disease unprepared," replied Merwood. "Why, have you not suffered the smallpox nor been inoculated yourself, Alan?"

"Why no, sir."

"You surprise me! You, living amongst the scum of London, not protecting yourself against the scourge! Seven of ten who contract the disease are for the grave, Alan. How should you advise your assurance men on the wisdom of their enterprises were they to disregard such odds in the drawing up of their contracts? 'Twill not do, my boy. You must be ingrafted at once."

"But—"

"I'll hear no more on the subject, Alan. One death in the family is quite enough!"

Treviscoe's eyebrows arched. He had not been aware that Dr. Merwood considered him a relation. His glance moved to fall on Elizabeth Merwood, who was comforting her shattered aunt. He suppressed the pang of longing he suddenly felt, and what remained was a sense of dread but of what, he was unsure.

"Very well. As you suggest, 'twould not augur well for my reputation were it to be said that I was a man who invited disaster. Shall you then perform the operation, sir?"

"I? I should be glad to do so, Alan, were I prepared with the necessities, but I'm afraid you must apply to Dr. Tindle. In former days, before he came to Bath, he was physician to some of the most illustrious names in England—Despencer, I think, and Sandwich. He's an Oxford man, and albeit he's ignorant of the science of the thing, nonetheless he is a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, and I do not doubt his competence in ingrafting a patient already full grown."

Treviscoe nodded thoughtfully. "Then I shall do so."

Merwood lifted his walking stick and stared fixedly at its tip.

"But if—if—"

"If? You have reservations, sir?"

"Only, I was about to say, that if you show any symptoms not associated with the progress of the disease—"

"And why should that be?"

Merwood pursed his lips and frowned. He relaxed the elevation of his walking stick and planted it in front of him as he stepped forward. "There can always be complications, my boy. Caroline, my sister, told me of Lucy's extreme discomfort in the stomach before the end, and that is not typical of the smallpox. Perhaps it was Dr. Tindle's emetics were the cause, but I didn't much care for the sound of it. So I should say that if any

such signs manifest themselves in your own self, it might be well to remove from Dr. Tindle's ministrations and seek my further advice, although I will not be long in Bath."

Treviscoe kept his face free of expression. In spite of his respect for Dr. Merwood, whose Scottish medical training made him more advanced than most, Treviscoe had seen enough misery in treatments to have a generally low opinion of doctors.

"As in all things pertaining to constitutional matters, I shall abide by your advice," he said at length, stealing a glance behind them at the austere Dr. Tindle. The man's eyes were lit up like fire beacons, bloodshot as though he hadn't slept in weeks but as wide open as a fresh grave. It made an uncomfortable contrast to the general tearfulness of the assembly. Treviscoe's sense of dread deepened.

"Emetics, then! Should I refuse 'em?"

"By no means should you do so, Alan, if you are in any condition to swallow 'em—for the disease can cause such swelling in the throat as to render the administration of medicine near impossible—but emetics are at the heart of medicine," replied Merwood.

"Aye, then it is fortunate I had my boyhood in shadow of Cornet Castle," said Treviscoe. The look of concentration on his face disappeared beneath the customary affection of bored listlessness.

"What's that?"

"'Tis nothing but an errant thought, sir," said Treviscoe quietly.

The march to the churchyard proceeded.

Treviscoe's ingrafting required that he should be in quarantine for more than a week after the operation. Only those persons who would not be in danger of contracting the disease, that is, only those who had survived the smallpox or been successfully inoculated, were to be admitted to his chamber. Unluckily for him, the list did not include his manservant Hero, and so some other arrangements for his domestic necessities needed to be made. To Charlotte's unspoken but nonetheless clearly expressed disapproval, it was decided that her sister Elizabeth should nurse him and attend to whatever needs she could in all propriety provide.

Dr. Tindle and his shadow Mr. Labbett attended him the day after the funeral.

"The common procedure requires four to five incisions," explained Dr. Tindle, "although in the course of a lifetime of medical practice, I oft have found six to eight more efficacious, which in the course of events shall produce scarring to the affected areas. Therefore I advise that you should choose such portions of your figure as will not be exposed to public view, such as your thighs and upper arms."

"Are so many necessary, doctor?" Treviscoe asked. "Reason might dictate but one."

"That should never suffice, sir," said Tindle, his eyes narrowing with suppressed anger. "Never, indeed! There must be an adequate admixture of the humors for the

poison to be successfully overcome. Otherwise, 'twere to court death."

"Methought danger always present in this procedure—*exempli gratia*, young Lucy Phelps—"

Dr. Tindle stood erect, noticeably offended. "I am but a mortal man, sir, mortal even as the girl, and cannot imagine how in my imperfect state I might be held to account for the summons of Divine Providence!"

"I should never call a child's death providential, doctor—"

"You're vexing the doctor, sir!" Labbett interrupted. "Him who shall deliver you from the scourge!"

"Deliver, aye, deliver," muttered Tindle, his eyes rolling upward.

"Peace, then! Let's get on with it," said Treviscoe. "Am I to be blamed for pausing before the lancet?"

"There's nowt to fear," said Labbett. "An artist, is the doctor! Ye'll witness that!"

"The art of medicine," Treviscoe said, frowning. "Nevertheless, I will not have eight lacerations. One in each thigh and in each upper arm will answer."

Tindle smiled, his composure quite restored. He reached into his medical bag and retrieved a small stoppered glass vial and a leather-bound oblong case the size of a man's hand, which when opened revealed a set of sharply honed flat-bladed lancets. "Very good, then. Four have been known to be effectual, if not as well as eight. Now be so kind as to remove your breeches."

Treviscoe pulled off his clothing and gripped the arms of his chair as Tindle meticulously and swiftly cut a half-inch incision in his right

thigh a few inches above the knee. Blood trickled forth, but the razor sharpness of the scalpel made the wound hurt less than Treviscoe had expected. He watched nervously as Dr. Tindle gingerly unstopped the vial and used the flat of a second lancet to remove a quantity of yellow pus. Labbett stood ready with a linen bandage.

Tindle began to whisper almost inaudibly: "*Dicit Dominus Deus...*" Treviscoe was repelled as the putrid salve was slathered into the incision, but his attention was transfixed.

"... *ab idolis vestris et ab universis contaminationibus...*"

There was a sharp twinge of pain as the doctor applied the ingraft. Labbett awkwardly affixed the bandage around his leg as Tindle methodically repeated the procedure on the other thigh.

"... *convertimini et recedite...*"

In like manner the arms followed.

"... *vestris avertite facies vestras.*"

Then it was over.

"To bed with you," said Tindle. "You are to admit no one into your presence but that he has had the disease or been ingrafted."

He reached into his bag and pulled out another bottle, much larger than the first and labeled in illegible Latin.

"This is an emetic according to my own recipe, specific to the variolation," he said. "You are to swallow two spoonfuls after supper and before bed and when you awaken each morn. Eat nothing but wholesome gruel, and drink nought but

good strong porter. I will instruct your nurse as to other particulars."

He closed his bag and stood. He seemed unnaturally joyous and invigorated. "Let us go, then, Labbett, and call again upon the morrow to see what progress shall transpire. Farewell until then, Mr. Treviscoe."

"Good afternoon, Dr. Tindle, Mr. Labbett," said Treviscoe, feeling distinctly sick.

"Yes, by all means, goodbye!" Grinning widely, exposing his stained dentures, Dr. Tindle spun upon his heel and left the room.

No man alive, or at least no Englishman of the eighteenth century, cared to appear before the object of his affections in a state of abject weakness. Dr. Tindle's emetic was most effective, and Treviscoe found himself breaking into sweats and involuntarily emptying his stomach at regular intervals, usually in the company of Elizabeth Merwood, his nurse, and her maid Sally, upon whom fell all menial tasks. One woman was never present without the other, and so there were always two of them to witness his indispositions. He was humiliated, and it made him cross.

He lifted his face from the bucket and beheld the charming face of his beloved, her brow furrowed with concern, and he fervently wished for a sudden and painless death. Such despair seemed to invite further convulsions, and he quickly lowered his head again.

Elizabeth was in her element. As daughter to one of Exeter's most eminent physicians, she was a skilled and unsentimental nurse.

Her father referred to her as "my Hygeia" in reference to the famous daughter of Aesculapius. She exhibited a fervent maternalism that made the merely intolerable a source of morbid anguish.

It was with a deep sense of gratitude to unseen powers, therefore, that Treviscoe greeted the news that the bottle had finally been exhausted. "I must needs have the prescription filled again forthwith," she announced.

"No," he groaned.

"I am much concerned that there has been no reaction to the ingraftment," she continued. "Perhaps the matter had lost its virulence when the operation was performed. At the least, we must continue the medication."

"No," he groaned again, rapidly facing the bucket again and retching. Nothing was forthcoming. "As to the failure of symptoms, when I was a boy—"

"Not to worry. Dr. Tindle has provided me with the name of a reliable apothecary from whom I can replenish the medicine. I shall repair there this very afternoon."

Stunned to silence, Treviscoe closed his eyes. His lips felt uncommonly numb, and the pain in his stomach was severe. There was none of the relief one should expect. His mind was far from clear; but he remembered something Dr. Merwood had said about Tindle. He had been physician to Despencer and Sandwich. That was it. It was somehow important. But how?

His stomach heaved again, and the thought was lost.

Elizabeth Merwood found herself before the entrance to the apothecary shop. A sign above the door showed an illustration of a mortar and pestle, around which was written the legend:

JOS: CORIDON & SON
CHYMISTS

She opened the door and entered.

There was a mousy little man behind the counter, wearing a modest grey wig and shoes with pewter buckles. His eyes lit up in obvious appreciation for Elizabeth's elfin good looks, and he bowed, twice, in an unpleasantly unctuous manner.

"How may I be of service to my lady?"

"Have I the pleasure—" honor seemed too strong a word—"of addressing Monsieur Coridon, Senior, or Junior?"

He tittered unattractively.

"I regret to say that Monsieur Coridon, Senior, as you have styled him, has been dead these several years. No, madam, I am, alas, the erstwhile junior partner on these premises. Mr. Joseph Coridon, *fils*, at your service."

"Very good, sir. My name is Miss Elizabeth Merwood—"

"Who's that, then?" a hoarse female voice demanded, bellowing from the rear of the shop. An obese and very short woman hauled herself through the door behind the counter and surveyed Elizabeth with suspicion. Mr. Coridon winced.

"A customer, my dear, that is all."

Mrs. Coridon looked suspiciously at Elizabeth and then at her husband. She looked closely again at Elizabeth, nodded, and the suspi-

cion faded. It was as though she had decided that Elizabeth was too pretty for her husband to hope for and therefore not a rival.

"As I was saying, I am Miss Elizabeth Merwood, daughter to Dr. Erasmus Merwood of Exeter. I have come hither to have a prescription filled, from Dr. John Tindle of Bath."

"Tindle again, is it?" Mrs. Coridon curled her lip. "A mad old dog, he."

"I am a nurse, ma'am," said Elizabeth, "in charge of a variolated patient of Dr. Tindle's. I have come seeking to fill a prescription for an emetic, which I had been led to believe might be acquired here."

"Now see here, Miss Merde—" at this, Elizabeth raised an eyebrow, but it was obvious that Mrs. Coridon was unaware she had said something coarse—"if your patient is under the care of Mad Tindle, he's like to be a corpse before the week is out. Why, I'd not wager a farthing he lives out the week, but gladly a guinea the other way! It's the quicksilver what's done it to old Tindle, I daresay. Better to trust simple apothecaries than the likes of him. No telling what's in Tindle's potions."

"When I prepare them myself, I certainly have the knowledge, Mary. Now, Dr. Tindle has been very kind to us," said Mr. Coridon to his wife. "He prefers us to every other chymist in Bath for the preparation of his special emetics and nostrums, and his skill as a physician has been demonstrated at court. Please do not denigrate him so, I beg you."

His wife gave him a look of sheer contempt.

"You know your business, Joseph," she said at length. "I shan't interfere. But a word to the wise, miss! Don't be stuck with Dr. Tindle alone in a room, is all!" Pulling her skirts up, she sailed back whence she came.

Elizabeth recognized the look in Mr. Coridon's eyes as his wife departed. It was a look of utter hatred.

When he turned back to Elizabeth, his obsequiousness returned as though it had never been interrupted. "The variolation emetic? Of course, of course. I have the recipe here, and it will be but a few moments in preparation. Pray excuse me till it is done."

As good as his word, Mr. Coridon quickly combined several powders and liquids into a uniform solution and presented it to her, charging two shillings sixpence.

She accepted the bottle and, curtseying, withdrew. She was never so glad to be back on the streets of Bath, and she hurried back to Treviscoe's apartment.

Treviscoe's condition grew steadily worse. Although the wounds from the ingrafting failed to develop any sign of inflammation, he developed a rash, and his stomach pains grew in intensity. When he became too weak to lift himself out of bed, Elizabeth sent for Dr. Tindle and her father.

Dr. Merwood took the stairs to Treviscoe's bedroom three at a time despite his bulk. He threw open the door and panted, watching as Elizabeth wrung her hands, her face contorted with worry. Sally sat off

to one side, weeping. Dr. Tindle leaned attentively over the patient. Willard Labbett stood by the window, arrhythmically swaying.

The patient's breathing was labored. Merwood gaped in shock at how weak his friend appeared. There was an unmistakable tinge of jaundice in the sclera of his glazed eyes.

"Tindle, what have ye wrought here?" he thundered, pushing the Oxford man out of the way and getting a closer look at Treviscoe. "You are a bigger fool than I e'er imagined! Here is no sign of the smallpox at work! 'Tis some other disease!"

Tindle stared at Merwood, his eyes red and bright. "Fool? Am I a fool? 'Ware evil words, ye unbeliever! *Hos d'an, More, enochos estai eis ten gehennon tou pyros.*"

"What is that?—*gehennon tou pyros*," muttered Treviscoe, ". . . *gehennon . . . pyros*—! Hellfire! Hellfire!" He struggled to sit up. Dr. Merwood strove to prevent him.

"You are delirious, my boy!"

"Hellfire . . ." His hoarse voice began to fade.

Merwood carefully helped Treviscoe lie down. Gradually the patient grew calmer and drifted off to sleep.

"Aye, that's the medicine needed now. Rest, young Alan, rest well."

Dr. Merwood stood erect, shoulders back, chin aggressively forward.

"Dr. Tindle! I regret your services are no longer required. I shall look after the patient henceforth."

Tindle barked a laugh. "Oh no, my good sir! He is my patient! You cannot presume to replace me in

such wise, contrary to the ethics of our profession. His soul is now in my care."

"His soul, Dr. Tindle, was never in your care. I remind you, sir, that you are a doctor of physic, not of divinity. In ordinary circumstances I should never interfere, but a simple glance at the patient is enough to assure me that you are not competent to prevent his demise. I am not at all convinced that we view the ethics of our profession in the same light; in my view the life of the patient always comes first! I will thank you to withdraw."

"You have not the power to relieve me, sir," said Tindle. "That is a decision for the patient."

"Oh no, it is not!" interrupted Elizabeth. "His care was entrusted to me, sir. And I for one will not fail in my obligation. You are dismissed."

"By what power?" Tindle smirked.

"By the power of attorney granted me by Mr. Treviscoe," Elizabeth answered smartly. "I see you did not anticipate this action on his part. But it is true."

She walked across the room and lifted a document from the writing desk. "Here it is, Dr. Tindle, should you care to examine it."

"But you are a woman! How can you exercise the rights of a man?"

"Women are not without rights in England, Dr. Tindle, as you would be aware were you a doctor of law. Now let us end this discussion. Good day to you."

Tindle grabbed the document from Elizabeth's hands. He gave it a cursory look, and rage played across his features. He crumpled

it in his hand and let it drop to the floor. "Labbett! We are leaving!"

"Eh? Very good, doctor."

Tindle stormed from the room, and Labbett followed him unsteadily.

Merwood looked up at his daughter, pride radiating from his face. "Odd's teeth, girl, that was well done!"

"Thank the foresight of Mr. Treviscoe," she said. "He had the document drawn up after my return from the chymist's, for what reason I cannot fathom. But it has served."

"Served indeed!" replied her father. He mopped Treviscoe's brow with his handkerchief. "I only hope it was not served too late."

Sally continued to sob.

When Treviscoe awoke the next morning, feeble but coherent, he surprised Elizabeth by rejecting the gruel and porter appointed for his breakfast and insisting on milk.

Although she knew her father could scarcely approve, she was so ebullient with joy that he had taken some interest in his surroundings that she hastened to obey him. He drank an entire pint in a single draught. She could tell from his grimace that he was still in pain and feeling queasy. He took a deep breath. "I will have none of any emetic from this moment hence," he told her flatly.

There was a firmness in his eyes that strongly contrasted with his normal affectation of ennui.

"I have discharged Dr. Tindle," she said by way of reply, unsure of his reaction.

He simply nodded.

"I will have a nap now, if you'll be so kind as to pardon me," he announced, and within minutes was asleep again.

Sally had long since cried herself out, but Elizabeth suddenly felt tears brimming in her eyes as she realized that Alan Treviscoe might live after all.

Nevertheless, his convalescence was not rapid. Eight days after the ingrafting the danger he might pose to others had expired, and he was allowed to attend some of the amusements the city had to offer. He tired so easily, however, that a Bath chair was required wherever he went, and Hero wheeled him everywhere, even up and down the steep hills that separated the Upper Rooms from the Lower Rooms and the Crescent.

He took special pleasure in concerts and recitals. At one soirée he made acquaintance of an Hanoverian cellist, one Friedrich Wilhelm Herschel; besides music, they discovered a common interest in optics, although Mr. Herschel's fascination was with the macroscopic rather than the reverse. Still, Treviscoe found it refreshing to converse in the language he had used in his student days in Heidelberg.

Bath being a town filled with valetudinarians and others recovering from the ravages of various illnesses, his presence in the chair excited no comment, even when he attended a ball.

He was attended by Charlotte and Elizabeth. As a married woman, Charlotte politely refused offers to dance, smiling and politely curtsying with each refusal. Treviscoe

reflected that although it must cost her dear to say no, at least she had the satisfaction of knowing her beauty drew every gallant in the room over to her.

Elizabeth was also inclined to refuse such invitations, which were fewer than her sister's. She was dressed less resplendently than Charlotte, and she lacked her sister's spectacular Grecian beauty, but she was still very pretty in her slender and delicate way.

"I perceive, sir, that you are the cause of Miss Merwood's refusal to grace the company with her participation," a young nobleman informed him between pinches of snuff. "It cannot answer, sir. We are not all confined to wheels to cross the floor, y'know. Have pity and instruct her to honor me with her assent!"

Treviscoe smiled. "He's quite right, Miss Merwood," he said. "No harm shall come to me for watching you dance, but *au contraire*, the sight of it shall afford me great pleasure."

"The patient's judgment should never be allowed to supplant that of his nurse," she replied. "I must refuse."

"I shall not be in this Bath chair forever," said Treviscoe, "and when I am out of it, I shall beg the honor of being your partner myself. In the meantime both of us should forget every step to the minuet unless you practice enough to instruct me when the time comes."

The young nobleman clearly disliked being cast in the role of Treviscoe's substitute, but manners forbade withdrawing now. Elizabeth dropped her fan and stood, accept-

ing the nobleman's hand, and he led her out onto the floor.

Another well-dressed man, his waistcoat ornately embroidered with Italianate floral designs, approached them. "Good to see you so well, Treviscoe!"

"I do not believe I've had the honor, sir."

"'Course you have. Lloyd's, you know. Jervase Barkway, shipowner. Did some business with your friend Josiah Barron."

"Ah yes. Forgive my short memory."

"Cost me a pretty penny, sir, when you pulled out of it. Still, 't's one bet I'm glad to have lost. You'd be sore missed at Lloyd's, I must say, had your illness claimed you."

Treviscoe looked up at him in shock.

"Got to push off now. Just paying my respects and all."

Treviscoe recovered quickly.

"Good evening to you, Mr. Barkway."

"They make a most handsome couple, do they not?" asked Charlotte, who'd ignored Treviscoe's exchange with Barkway, a man of business and therefore beneath her notice. She was looking at Elizabeth and her partner. At another time, this comment would have been waspish, but Treviscoe knew from her tone that Charlotte was trying to be pleasant. He could tell she was vexed at being compelled to be amiable and polite to him on account of his condition. This delighted him no end, and he was careful to appear as fragile as possible.

"I'm sure they must do," he said with a falsely plaintive note.

"Look—there is Mr. Labbett," she said, indicating with her fan.

The surgeon staggered through the dancers, interrupting the flow of the stately procession, drawing objections and a few curses from the participants. He approached them, but before he drew next to them, he was heralded by the reek of gin.

"Mr. Treviscoe. Madam." He attempted to bow, but could not keep his feet under him and spilled onto the floor. Livered attendants appeared from nowhere and lifted him by the arms. From the opposite end of the gallery the ball's host approached, his face darkened with disapprobation.

"I'm afraid we will not have the pleasure of your company for very long, Mr. Labbett," said Treviscoe. "Was there something you meant to say to me?"

"Please, sir. Dr. Tindle no longer—" his lips bulged with a suppressed belch—"no longer calls upon me," he said. "My practise—practice—is ruined. They say I killed 'em, the patients, I mean! How now, what? Ain't it prep—preposh—damn'd unfair?"

The servants began to drag him away. "Look at ye!" he bellowed. "You're well enough! Will you not call upon the doctor? Explain it's all some ghastly mistake?"

He was indecorously ejected from the assembly.

Charlotte waved her fan so violently that it mimicked a hummingbird's wing. Her lips were pursed, her eyebrows arched, and her cheeks flushed. Treviscoe scarcely noticed.

"Aye, call on him I will," he said pensively, "and soon."

The next day he refused the chair and accepted the loan of Dr. Merwood's walking stick to keep him stable. Hero buckled his swordbelt around his waist.

Elizabeth and Sally were in a flurry. "I cannot approve," Elizabeth's voice was pitched low with passion. "That man was nearly the death of you."

"That he wanted me dead I certainly cannot deny," he replied, "but 't's of the highest necessity that I proceed with my indagation. There are more lives than mine in the balance, and I mean to see the scale tipped in the favor of justice."

"Elizabeth," said her father mildly, "you may as well ask a hound not to hunt."

Treviscoe smiled at this backhanded compliment and placed his tricorn squarely on his head. Earlier that morning his dark brown hair had been dressed most handsomely by Hero, almost making up for the wanness of his face, and now, in spite of the lingering weakness, he felt more like himself than he had in days.

Hero entered the room, a fine sweat covering his brow. "I have just returned from Mr. Barkway, sir, per your instructions," he said breathlessly. "It is as you suspected."

"I thank you, Hero. Let us keep to our plan."

"Very good, sir."

He hired a chair—a concession to his infirmity, since he was customarily a fine walker. Before rapping at Dr. Tindle's door he consulted

his watch. Hero should be en route to their rendezvous.

He was admitted to Dr. Tindle's study. The blinds were drawn, but good wax candles burned everywhere, providing enough light to read by. And there was plenty to read. The room was strewn with books, open upon every available surface, showing scripts in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and even Arabic. A superficial survey revealed tomes on medicine, philosophy, religion, astrology, and history.

"Mr. Treviscoe," said Tindle. "I had hardly expected to hear from you again." The physician was in his shirtsleeves at his escritoire, a quill in his hand, his fingers stained with ink.

"I have come, Dr. Tindle, to offer my repentance."

"Repentance, sir?"

"Did you not so urge me during the ingrafting?"

Tindle laid down his pen. "I did not know you had understood me. I spoke so softly."

"And in the Latin, the comprehension of which you plainly did not allow me credit. You knew I was from Lloyd's; doubtless you thought that I was a commercial citizen rather than a gentleman of information. But I was educated at university, and I were a poor Christian who should not recognize such an entreaty as you pronounced. The Latin was from the prophecies of Ezekiel, I believe, and the King James Bible has it so: 'Thus saith the Lord God; Repent, and turn from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations.'"

"You *did* understand! I did not

"Thank that you could, and yet you gave me the hint when you spoke of Lucy Phelps: *exempli gratia* and all."

"So I did."

"Do you truly repent of your sins, then? But of course you do: I see the Lord hath delivered you from the scourge."

"Deliverance, I believe, is your vocation."

"I can tell you it is not easy being the instrumentality of God."

Treviscoe moved a large book from one of the chairs and sat down. "But before you were chosen, you too must have repented."

"Yes! Yes! But not before I felt His wrath!" Tindle joined his hands together and squeezed them tightly, almost as if he were in an ecstasy of prayer.

"It was the wrath of God that required the tincture of mercury, was it not?"

Tindle dropped his hands. "How did you learn of that?"

"Why, it was communicated to me," replied Treviscoe. "But I didn't fully recognize the import of it until the night of the crisis."

"Which crisis?"

"The night Miss Merwood terminated your services. Dr. Merwood called you a fool, and you quoted scripture."

"The words of Christ are mightier far than my own."

"Mightier than us all. It was from the Sermon on the Mount, according to St. Matthew: *hos d'an, More, enochos estai eis ten gehennon tou pyros*. *Have you ever felt yourself

become the vessel of revelation, Dr. Tindle? You must have done."

"To be filled with the Word of God," Tindle said in awe, "is an experience not soon forgot."

"I had a similar experience then, sir, to the words *gehennon tou pyros*—your reference to hellfire. 'Twas then I understood my danger. You see, Dr. Merwood told me you had been physician to Lord Le Despencer—the former Sir Francis Dashwood—and the Earl of Sandwich."

"The thought of hellfire has oft reclaimed the errant lamb," said Tindle, "but I know not what my personal history has to do with it."

The bloodshot whites of his bulging eyes shone in the candlelight.

"Alas, 'twas not the thought of hellfire that moved me but the words themselves. Have you ever been to Medmenham Abbey on the Thames?"

Tindle gaped at him.

"I thought as much," Treviscoe said. "It was your headquarters, your place of secret assignation, your temple of Satanic and orgiastic rites. Your society called itself the Order of St. Francis, but to all others you were known as the Hell-Fire Club. I learned of its existence in the year '68, but we need not go into that now. Dashwood was your leader, and Sandwich one of your most eminent members."

"Where have you learned this?"

"'Twas there you contracted the syphilis that moved you to repent, was it not? That is why you take mercury, to treat the same. It is

* ὅς δ' αὖν, Μωσὲ, ἐνοχὸς ἔσται εἰς τὴν γέεννον τοῦ πυρός: "but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hellfire." (Matthew 5:22)

also written in the Bible: *therapeuson seauton*. *

"Aye!" Tindle's voice near burst with agony. "Aye! A moment of pleasure with the harlot, a lifetime of torture! And at the end—madness, death, despair! Only two things stood between me and perdition: the tincture of mercury, the only effective medicine for the venereal pox, and God's infinite mercy."

"But swallowing mercury is not your only experience with the ingestion of poisons, I have cause to believe. For was it not a condition of membership, or rather a rite of initiation into the Monks of Medmenham, that you dose yourselves with arsenic, to learn the limits of your tolerance?"

"What of it?" Tindle demanded, clenching his fists.

"*What of it, sir?* Do you think me incapable of reason? Do you think I can be insensible to the fact that I was myself being poisoned with arsenic through the agent of your patent emetic? All the symptoms were there, and unhidden by the ingraft!"

"Impossible! 'Twas the Hand of the Lord that doomed you to death!"

Treviscoe leaned back in the chair. "But I yet live, and I think that I would not had I continued to take your treatment. Even so, I can well conceive it were not by *your* hand that the arsenic was introduced into your purgative. There is oft a touch of naivety to the faithful that clouds their reason.

"Harken, doctor! Dr. Merwood informs me that seven of ten who

catch the smallpox meet death, and that the evolution of ingraft into disease, while not unknown, is relatively rare. How, then, have the last several of your variolated patients fallen victim to smallpox? I will tell you: their constitutions were weakened by arsenic so that any resistance to illness they should have had if healthy was therewith in abeyance. The smallpox took hold of them, and they died. So it would have been with me, too, had I been vulnerable to the disease at all.

"You have been the agent of death, Dr. Tindle, not by the will of God but by the will of Lucifer in his influence over the evil of mankind."

"No! No!"

"Deny then that the symptoms are those of arsenic poison."

"There are many such causes for such symptoms."

"But none of them are associated with smallpox! You have been hiding the truth from yourself, sir!"

"Did it never occur to you, that between the effects of your self-administered treatment for the French disease and the disease itself your mind may have become unhinged? That your holy revelations were the product of an unbalanced mental faculty? It has been known before, sir! Come now, you are a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians! What are the effects of mercury upon the reason? Why do we call a lunatic 'mad as a hatter,' that is, as mad as one who is exposed to the ill effects of quicksilver in the facture of felt?"

"God is merciful. He hath forgiv-

* *θεράπευσον σεαυτόν*: "Physician, heal thyself." (Luke 4:23)

en my trespasses." Tindle buried his face in his hands and began to weep.

"And were you aware, Dr. Tindle, that the survival of your patients greatly concerns the gamblers of Bath? My own survival whilst in your care was the object of a large wager."

There was no reaction. Tindle was beyond reach. His body was wracked with sobbing.

"I shall let myself out, sir," said Treviscoe. "I have another call to make that will not wait."

There was a silver bell attached to the door of Joseph Coridon's shop. It tinkled merrily, a welcome and comforting sound bespeaking the normality of daily commerce. Treviscoe found no comfort in it. It might as well have been a death knell.

Coridon looked up from where he was packaging medicines in paper. "How may I be of service to the gentleman?"

"I had your name from Mr. Jer-vase Barkway," said Treviscoe. "He told me that you were in the way of arranging certain contracts."

Coridon laughed. "I? I'm but a simple apothecary, sir. What sort of contracts had you in mind?"

"Of the life insurance variety."

"Oh no, sir! I mix preparations of physic."

"Tis most strange—Mr. Barkway was pointedly specific in his recommendation. He and I are colleagues of a sort—we met at Lloyd's in London. Many a wager is laid down there in the form of a contract."

"Then it's a wager you're after,

sir," said Coridon. "Now, that's a different matter, isn't it? But no contracts if you please. While there's no harm in a wager, it mightn't appear that way to the Assizes, if you get my meaning, were there a document signed and sealed and all."

"I apprehend your point, Mr. Coridon. Some might take it as callous that wagers were made on whether, say, a little girl might die as the result of an ingrafting."

"Still, as I said, where's the harm in it? Some good may come of winning a full purse, after all."

"I perceive we understand each other. But I was led to believe that you only give odds concerning the patients of Dr. John Tindle."

Coridon paused. "Were you now, sir?"

"As it happens, it is a patient of his I am interested in. Have you known the doctor long?"

"Oh yes, sir. Many years. You might even say I was apprenticed to him, after a fashion. My father—Mr. Coridon, Senior, that was—sent me with him when he looked after many worthies—earls and baronets and such. My father thought it would be good training for an apothecary to learn at the side of an eminent physician. I was constantly by his side in those days."

"But he has declined in his age, has he not?"

"Aye, sad to say—taking up with that drunken butcher Lobbett, for example, if I may be so bold, although I don't mind a tankard or two myself on occasion."

"And the prognoses of his patients have similarly declined?"

Coridon laughed. "Oh, they have

done that, sir, especially where there's the smallpox! Here's the game: you can wager whether a patient will live or on the hour he goes to meet his Maker. I will lay the appropriate odds. Of course, not all patients are worthy of speculation—only he whose illness has the possibility of gravity. Now, who was it you wished to wager upon?"

"Another man of Lloyd's. His name is called Alan Treviscoe."

Coridon frowned.

"That'll never do, sir, I have learned that Mr. Treviscoe has discharged the doctor and that he is on the mend. The wagers respecting his condition are closed, and the winnings all collected."

"Then it might interest you to hear that Mr. Treviscoe called upon Dr. Tindle this very morn," said Treviscoe. "I have been led to understand that Dr. Tindle has been rehabilitated. It had something to do with a misunderstanding concerning the daughter of Mr. Treviscoe's other physician."

"Miss Merwood, you mean?" Coridon's eyes lit up. "She was in this very shop last week, sir. A winsome bit, I must say! Wouldn't mind some meself. We should all have such a nurse to comfort us." He winked and chortled. "Mr. Treviscoe must have been feeling better, no mistake. Attempted something he oughtn't, did he?"

"In any event he has engaged Dr. Tindle again. 'Tis said he is still very weak, confined to a chair. There is every possibility that his disease might return, wouldn't you say?"

"You have no love for Mr. Treviscoe, have you, sir?"

"His every action has its effect on me."

Coridon nodded. "Aye then. I'll take a wager on him. To live, or did you wish to guess the time of his passage?"

"What are the odds?"

"Oh, I'd say 'tis not likely he'll survive, sir. Three to one on life, at a guess, others depending on what is wagered, now that the book is open again."

"Then the long odds are that he shall live."

"That's it. Your wager, sir? And how much? And your name?"

"I'll wager on life because, after all, he's escaped death once. Let the sum put forward be twenty guineas, for that should see me quite fair. As to my name, perhaps it is familiar to you, for I am called Alan Treviscoe."

"Alan—!" Coridon went pale and turned to flee through the back of the shop, where he was stopped by the tall and imposing figure of Hero.

Hero grabbed him by his shirt collar and dragged him back into the front.

"I have no intention of dying for your profit, Mr. Coridon, especially not abetted by the arsenic you include in every emetic you prepare for Dr. Tindle," said Treviscoe.

"I do not know what you mean," Coridon replied, cringing.

"Deny it if you will, it matters not. I have proof of your murderous intent: the bottle, prepared by you in the sight of Miss Merwood, of Dr. Tindle's patent emetic for ingrafted patients, still containing most of its deadly contents."

Coridon struggled against Hero to little avail.

"There is nothing to be gained from attempting escape," said Treviscoe. "I have you now."

"Have me? 'Tis I who should have you, nailed in a coffin!" said Coridon bitterly. "You should not now be among the living had Dr. Tindle's ingraftment of you succeeded. Then no one should have suspected anything! Trust him in his madness to botch the operation."

"It was your plan, I expect, to disgrace Dr. Tindle, knowing that before long the invariable fatal results of his consultations for smallpox inoculation must come to public notice. I'm sure your gambling earnings padded your purse well enough, but I suspect your main purpose in accepting wagers on his patients was to call attention to the trail of death he left behind him. And yet just now, you spoke of your years with him almost with affection. What has he done to you that made you turn to murdering the innocent merely out of spite?"

Coridon sneered. "They were grand days when he and I frequented Medmenham Abbey. I see you know what that means. No, I was too low to be admitted to the inner circle, but there were amusements even for the likes of me, entertainments enough to sate the most jaded appetite. The beauties from the finest brothels in London! Young virgins heretofore unsullied by any lusty swain! Wine flowing like beer! It was a life, I can tell you. But then he caught the pox, and turned to religion: the very thing the Order had been founded to mock! He even

forced me to wed that virago, my wife.

"Aye, she was once fair to look upon, the trull, but when Tindle knew he could not ever again have carnal knowledge of her, he thought to recompense her by passing her on to me.

"Well, if he could become the agent of the Lord, why should I not become the agent of the Devil? When his reason began to wane, I saw my opportunity and took it. 'Twas not difficult to convince him that he'd become the living angel of death and that his failures as a physician were signs of his success as God's deputy on Earth. He is awaiting Judgment Day in our time, did you know that?"

Treviscoe stared at him in deep disgust. "For you, Mr. Coridon, it will come sooner than later."

Dr. Merwood and Alan Treviscoe sat in Treviscoe's drawing room smoking.

"I should have detected that it was poison," said Merwood. "When you cried hellfire, I thought you delirious."

"I was near enough to delirium that you cannot be found at fault for believing so, sir," said Treviscoe. "Indeed, my wits were at such an ebb that at that moment I thought that Dr. Tindle was the man who meant to murder me."

"So did we all."

"But, of course, it made no sense, not after I realized the nature of the poison."

"You mean because he had not e'er touched the bottle Elizabeth brought from Coridon."

"Even without that, it could never have been poor mad Tindle who supplied the poison. Don't you see? He believed the deaths to be miraculous, the intervention of God. He wouldn't interfere with the work of the Lord. He believed himself to be merely the vessel of God's power. And why would he, even mad as he is, choose to administer arsenic in an emetic, of all vehicles? Why, he would know that the patient should disgorge most of the poison in the course of events. An inefficient method, sir! Were Dr. Tindle the poisoner, he must surely have chosen a better means. No, he who poisoned the emetic must have done so because it was his only avenue, and that meant it had to be Coridon."

"You were uncommon lucky, Alan, to discover in time what was being done. If the variolation had taken, you would now be in the grip of the scourge, weakened beyond any hope of recovery by the poison, like Lucy Phelps, poor moppet."

"I am lucky if to be maliciously poisoned by an utter stranger can be called luck, but there was never any danger of the smallpox, Dr. Merwood, as I tried to tell you," replied Treviscoe. "Remember how at the funeral I told you that I spent my boyhood in the shadow of Cornet Castle? Cornet Castle is the ancient fortification on Guernsey. My father was Cornish, but my moth-

er is of the Channel Isles; 'tis how I came to speak French.

"Guernsey is rich in cattle, Dr. Merwood, and although the island is blissfully free of most of the diseases that plague mankind in Britain and on the Continent, there has never been a herd of cattle where the cow-pock is unknown. I had that disease as a boy, and it is well-known that, once having suffered from the cow-pock, it is quite impossible to contract smallpox."

"An old wives' tale, Alan!"

"Then why did the ingrafting fail to take hold? Especially in my weakened state?"

"Medicine is an art, my boy, and art is filled with mystery. Only God is omniscient. But if you believed yourself immune to smallpox, why did you agree to the ingraft?"

Treviscoe laughed. "You gave me little option, if you recall, sir! Besides, I could not see that it would do any harm."

Hero entered the room, bearing a newspaper. "I have some tragic news, sir," he said. "Dr. Tindle has taken his own life. He left a note proclaiming it to be the will of God."

"Another victim, then," said Treviscoe quietly. "I hope that by destroying his faith I did not in the end destroy him." He took the broadsheet, containing all the news in Bath for that day, December 22, 1773.

TOOTH FAIRY

Gary Alexander



There's a lot to be said for transferring out of Production to Claims. You might look at it as being grounded, but Management strongly prefers that you do not. You're not fighting to meet quotas as they constantly raise the bar. You're relying on your problem-solving skills rather than blinding, mindless speed. You're now a professional/technical employee. You're empowered.

At least that's how Management sold it to me. Not a tough sale when you're no longer as, well, sprightly as you used to be. And not when you consider the alternative, which is downsizing.

What they don't tell you is that you're pulling files out of the archives as green around the edges as a spoiled block of cheese. The trunk of my company car is so full of these it's dragging on the ground, flattening near-bald tires. But off I go, not exactly dawdling, squinting through rock-chipped glass, pumping a roostertail of blue smoke. After budgets are written, Claims always seems to end up on the hind teat.

Bob Pat Hoopsma of Various Falls, Oregon, drove an eighteen-wheeler. I finally caught up with him at a forlorn truck stop off I-84. Bob Pat was in the lounge. Cigarette smoke hung like a temperature inversion, and the jukebox lamented lost pickup trucks, dogs, and loves, usually in that order.

To insure that I'd have his attention, I sashayed in with big hair and small clothes. Though Bob Pat was one step from geezerhood, I recognized him from the file description. The pencil neck and jug hairs were in place, the cowlick presumably squashed under his John Deere cap.

I took the stool next to him. Bob Pat undressed me with his hemorrhaging eyeballs. That's okay. I can live with a few minutes of degradation. When they're three sheets to the wind and lust-crazed, it's easier to get to the bottom line.

With no time to waste I said, "Bob Pat, on 11 September 1952 you lost a lower incisor. Still young enough to believe in the Tooth Fairy, you placed it underneath your pillow and fell fast asleep."

"Huh?"

I sighed and repeated myself.

"A Kenworth's a lot roomier than some folks think," he said, leering.

"Yes, I know," I said provocatively.

"Whoo-ie! Whatcha drinking, toots?"

I ignored him and dug into my purse/briefcase for file notes and pocket calculator. I said, "You awoke in the morning. Your tooth was gone, and you had not been compensated."

"Don't I know you from someplace way back when?"

"No. In the early 1950's, my territory was in the Midwest Division," I lied. "Standard compensation in the chronological-geographical zone was either a dime or a quarter. You can't be expected to recall. We're giving you the benefit of the doubt by assuming the larger denomination."

Bob Pat Hoopsma gulped his beer and said, "Them was the days. They made coins out of real silver."

I swatted his paw from my knee and began crunching numbers. "Yes, they did, Mr. Hoopsma. For that reason, we're basing our offer on a quarter-ounce of silver at today's closing price, pegging interest at prime rate plus two percent, compounded daily. I'm figuring it for you on the spot to give you the accrual benefit of every day."

I showed him the result: ninety-four dollars and thirty-one cents.

He frowned at the readout and shook his head. "No way. Sure, I bought it before, but I never paid no gal no ninety—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Hoopsma. You're not paying me, I'm paying you."

His mouth dropped, but when he saw the cash, he slid it over with his bar change and signed the Release of All Claims, no questions asked. I was out of there lickety-split, on to my next call. Until I was called on the carpet, I thought I'd closed out Hoopsma and his family's file.

But there it was, moldering on the boss's desk.

She thumbed an edge. Cardboard and paper corners flaked off, sending up dust motes. "I thought in Orientation I covered the necessity of reading the files."

"You covered *reviewing* the files. Scanning for pertinent—"

She raised a hand. "Date of client's complaint?"

I was so proud I remembered. Perhaps it was because '52 was my rookie year, freshly trained and new in the field. "Eleven September 1952. The following morning, Bob Pat cried his eyes out. His mom alleged the Tooth Fairy visited. The quarter, however—"

"Dime, incidentally. The client's memory is selective." She pushed the file toward me. "Read on. Actually read."

I flipped the pages with trembling fingers. Regardless of years of service, there was no such thing in this outfit as a buyout package, a golden handshake. You were a team player until death did you part.

It was obvious. How could I have missed it? On 11 September 1952 Mrs. Hoopsma beat a confession out of Bob Pat's older sister, Mary Pat, that she had stolen the dime. I recognized my initials in the margins. Even in those days, though, quotas were high. I couldn't be expected to remember each and every call.

I shoved the folder aside. I knew I was in for it. Management wasn't paid to be reasonable and sensitive.

"You were a Production Field Agent in that territory in the 1950's. According to these records, you serviced the Hoopsma children on one unspecified occasion."

"I'm sorry. Obviously I had serviced the Hoopsma household. Whether or not I made this particular call, I simply don't remember."

"You couldn't be expected to. Not when you make scores of calls per night. Furthermore, in the precomputer era, we didn't document our files as thoroughly as we do now."

How true. Now Production staffers scanned bar codes on orders when they completed an assignment. The transaction was fed into our main-frame. Precise data has cut the incidence of new claims dramatically.

"This, however, may have been the seminal event that propelled Mary Pat from this dysfunctional family full tilt into a life of crime," she went on.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Not our problem. Our problem is our backlog. You're aware of the upcoming audit?"

Certainly I was. How did she think I got into Claims so easily? Personnel allocations quintupled overnight when the date of the auditors' visit was announced. Every century Auditing sent Quality Teams around. Woe be it to Management if they were carrying too many open claims. This battleaxe sitting across from me was a world-class procrastinator who entered Management Training right out of school without working one single solitary night in Production. They were responsible for letting this slagheap of files build up, not me.

"But," I pleaded, "doesn't the fact that Mary Pat confessed prove that the assignment was completed?"

"It proves nothing. Number one, it was a coerced confession, its accuracy in question. Second, even if it were true, we paid the claimant twice," she said, ticking off her objections on sausagelike digits. "That means subrogation."

"Oh well, then we can ship the file to Subrogation?"

She looked at me like I was dumber than moss. "Please think proactively. Where have you seen a subro unit in the budget? And this isn't exclusively about money, you know."

I knew. It was about a higher, loftier principle: Cover Thy Backside.

At her suggestion I volunteered to spend three days at Excellence School. Mostly we memorized our mission statement and rehashed it article by article. This was sold to me as "personal enrichment," but it was hard to see it as anything except penance.

Freshly enriched, I headed back into the field. I either had to cadge a refund from Bob Pat or take a statement from Mary Pat recanting her confession to her mother. The former would be no cinch; Bob Pat was so blotto he wouldn't remember our encounter. If I demanded a ninety-four dollar thirty-one cent refund, him and his dirty mind, he'd try to negotiate me into the cab of his Kenworth.

But at least I had a general idea where to locate him. I hadn't the foggiest where Mary Pat was. I did read the Hoopsma jacket this time. Cover to cover. Maybe I'm prejudiced because I was a contributor, but I've seen sloppier files. Each deciduous incisor and cuspid was logged for both children, but some dates weren't recorded and notes were illegible. Perfection is difficult to attain when you're in such a hurry.

The last entry was 9 January 1954, a voucher checkoff, ten cents com-

pensation for a first molar. Bob Pat had reached a skeptical age, and his active file was closed. The narrative stated that his parents, Patrick and Patricia Hoopsma, were divorcing. Mary Pat was rumored to be incorrigible, a devious tomboy who'd graduated to truant and shoplifter. We knew all this because with two children of similar age we visited Hoopsma household frequently and we often recorded our observations. It is a common complaint of Management, somewhat justified, that while Production whines that it is too rushed to follow company policy, staffers have plenty of time to snoop and gossip.

Bob Pat proved too easy to trace. The previous Thursday, when descending a mountain pass, he'd hit a patch of ice and jackknifed his double semi. The graveside memorial service was held at a parched, windswept cemetery on a plateau. If there were waterfalls thereabouts in Various Falls, they had dried up.

It was a sparse turnout. Bob Pat Hoopsma was remembered by trucker buddies and a couple of sentimental hookers. They'd passed the hat and hired a minister. During the ten minute service he alluded to beloved family members, but none attended. Older sister Mary Pat was conspicuously absent.

Thanks to downsizing and consolidation, Clerical Support was becoming an endangered species, so I personally formalized my report on standard forms and delivered them to Management. She made several helpful criticisms of my typing and adherence to procedures, then slid aside the inch-high stack of documents and said, "Sad."

"Yes, it is," I agreed. "I think he was a decent man. He died alone and middle-aged—"

"No, I mean your inability to close the file. I'm not necessarily blaming you. For the moment we'll blame bad luck. However, Auditing will not be so understanding."

That was my marching order. On my hands and knees I begged an expense voucher to replace the tires on the company car before I met Bob Pat's fate. At the brief memorial service I had overheard Mary Pat's name. She was said to have recently lived in or near Grand Peaks, a neighboring and larger town. I was unable to locate her; the best I could do was a few vague recollections of her name. Though she had not lived in Grand Peaks "recently," I felt she might in some way remain connected.

At the boss's behest I represented myself as an attorney retained to discharge Bob Pat Hoopsma's estate. I don't know what was more loathsome, the subterfuge or the persona. But it worked.

I took a room at a motel and ran advertisements in the local newspaper. There was no estate. Bob Pat's landlady at his rooming house gave his clothing to Goodwill and a neighbor at whose curb it was parked had Bob Pat's old pickup truck towed off.

The word "estate" is magical. The advertising attracted a succession of ne'er-do-well chums and shirttail relatives. Finally Mary Pat showed.

"You've changed," she said, taking a seat without being invited.

"I beg your pardon."

"Small world, ain't it? I rarely forget a face," she cackled, lighting a cigarette before I could protest that this was a nonsmoking room. "You've put on some pounds, but hell, who am I to talk?"

Stocky, in jeans and logger shirt, Mary Pat Hoopsma was a rough-looking character. I said, "I'm sure we haven't previously met."

She shrugged and blew a smoke ring. "It's been awhile. How a nice girl like you got into the stinko lawyer racket is none of my business. What is my business is this estate thing. You can take my word for it, I'm his sole survivor."

"Why weren't you at the memorial service?"

"The world's been none too kind to me. I'm not saying it's not part my fault, but I decided fifteen years ago I wanted as little to do with it as I could. I been living in the hills and didn't hear he'd died till I came into town for supplies this morning. My Jeep needs a carburetor, and I damn near didn't make out of the woods. Let's cut to the chase. What did Bob Pat leave his big sis?"

"In a manner of speaking, ninety-four dollars and thirty-one cents."

She smiled sadly. "That's more than I expected he'd leave behind. Me and Bob Pat, we're a pair to draw to."

"You didn't stay in contact over the years?"

"Nope. Him and me, we were wild as kids, especially me. We left home young. I had some petty scrapes with the law and three bad marriages. He was a lifer in the military and went on to drive trucks. We were both cut out to be loners. An extra ninety-four thirty-one won't hurt a bit. When do I get my money?"

"Mary Pat, on 11 September 1952 did you or did you not steal from under your brother's pillow a dime payment for a lost lower incisor?"

She nodded appraisingly at me. "Yep. Like I said, I rarely forget a face. Tell me, how'd a tooth fairy go sour and become a lawyer?"


"Nobody has ever seen a tooth fairy," I said indignantly.

"Yeah? Well, what I seen come sailing through the window trailing all that twinkly stuff wasn't a B-29."

"Impossible!"

"Maybe nobody ever woke up during the switcheroo. I never did," Mary Pat said. "That don't mean you weren't spotted from time to time. C'mon, how would anybody believe in a tooth fairy unless there'd been a spotting or two? Kids don't just take their parents' word for everything, you know."

I had no response. The Tooth Fairy was assumed to be mythical when a child reached an age when other fantastical delights such as Santa Claus became suspect. Yet we were expected to perform in a real world context. This was an edgy paradox that troubled me throughout my years in Production.



"I heard that tinkling sound you made and crouched behind Bob Pat's dresser before you landed. I must of made noise, too. You grabbed his tooth and took off like a bat out of hell, no offense."

"You then stole the dime I left?"

"You didn't leave a dime, you were in such an all-out hurry. I'd gone into his room to steal it, but it wasn't there. You bugged out so fast you must of gotten rattled and forgot to leave the money."

My heart sank. I didn't think I'd bungled the transaction, but it was entirely possible. The most stressful aspect of Production next to achieving quotas was fear of discovery. I was young and skittish then, not as clear-headed and confident as I grew to be in later years. I said, "You were punished for the theft and confessed to it."

"If I hadn't, Mom would of turned me over to Dad. He was drinking awful heavy. It was a no-win situation. When did you say I was getting my ninety-four bucks?"

I violated every confidentiality rule in the Employee Handbook. I told her everything I've told you. I told her I was sorry about the ninety-four thirty-one. A duplicate payment was out of the question.

"Wait a second," Mary Pat said. "You think you're off the hook on account of you paid Bob Pat the money plus interest you didn't pay him back then?"

"Essentially, yes."

She laughed. "Listen, if you close out your file by telling the truth, and this hatchet squad you got paying you a visit is half as nasty as you claim, girly, you're in deep doodoo."

She was absolutely correct. I had brought the file to resolution, yes, though at great expense incurred due to my original botching. I'd done a terrible job of cleaning up my own mess.

"There is another possibility. I did do my job correctly, and you stole the money upon my departure."

"You'll never know, will you?"

I had a hunch she was bluffing but no proof. I could only shake my head.

"Cheer up," Mary Pat said. "I got an idea that'll make us both happy. Once in my misspent youth I did ninety days at the county farm for check forgery."

"Keep talking," I said.

We reached an agreement in principle, although "principle" was a misnomer for what we concocted. Mary Pat signed a statement admitting that she had pilfered the dime received by her brother for a lower incisor on 11 September 1952. She had an assortment of check stock in her tote bag and wrote one to "cash" for ninety-four thirty-one. The corporation upon which it was drawn would suffer no loss, for I would hold it in the file and conveniently lose it after the Quality Team had cut their swath through our repository.

I don't think you will be surprised to learn that there was a quid pro quo. I had no personal funds and, in the given situation, no scruples either. Under the circumstances please do not expect an expression of guilt.

Mary Pat had admired my brand-new tires and appraised them as the only items of value on my company car. Since they were of no use to her and her Jeep, we drove into an alley to an associate of hers in the automotive parts profession. He looked around furtively, ushered us into a garage, and quickly substituted my tires and wheels for replacements of an earlier vintage. For this consideration Mary Pat received a secondhand carburetor guaranteed to fit in her Jeep.

Everyone was happy. Temporarily, that is. The Hoopsma file and others I handled passed the Quality Team muster, if not with flying colors, with a grudging acceptance. My boss wasn't as fortunate. In fairness to her, the accumulated bureaucratic snafu was really quite impossible. Nevertheless, she racked up a record number of demerits and was transferred from Management to Production.

They told her not to look at it exactly as a demotion. There was a push on to get as many employees in the field as possible. After all, the corporate mantra of the nineties was "customer service".

Don't quote me as saying the transfer was ill-advised. Everyone deserves a chance. Not everyone is as lithe and graceful as they used to be, and one shouldn't pass premature judgment.

Please permit me to offer a caveat, though. If you see a sputtering object hurtling low in the night sky, don't jump to the conclusion that it is a killer meteor or comet. And if a child of yours just lost a tooth, open his or her window a crack.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Getty/Tony Stone Images

Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising and mine both-at-once. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION



SOMETHING SIMPLE

Rob Kantner

Illustration by Linda Weatherly

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/99

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The first Monday of the New Year found us still digging out from the first big storm of the winter. Four days before, an Alberta Clipper had blown through the Great Lakes region, gifting us with twenty-one inches of snow. Behind that, an Arctic air mass depressed highs to twelve at best. All this fouled up the roads, loused up New Year's Eve, and kept me on the clock all week-end long.

Well, that's what they pay me the big bucks for. And besides, this being metro Detroit, we expect such events. We welcome them, even. They give us a chance to be as tough as we talk.

Relieved to be back indoors, I trudged into the cosy warmth of the Norwegian Wood maintenance office. My people were deployed on the day's chores around the complex, dealing with busted pipes, tenants' gripes, and snow and ice or a combination thereof. Time for a smoke. Time for some coffee. Time for—

"Good morning, Ben," Shyla said.

She sat in my chair behind the plain, gray steel desk, slumped down so low I hadn't noticed her. "Morning," I said, not bothering hiding my surprise as I unbuttoned my peacoat. "You working this week? I thought you were back at school."

"Classes start tomorrow," Shyla said, straightening. I noticed that she had poured herself some coffee, smoked two cigarettes already. She had also switched my desk radio from 'ABX over to one of those Ani DiFranco stations. That's our Shyla, I thought with a smile. "Got a minute?" she asked.

"Sure, kid." Grabbing a chair, I sat down facing her and dug a short cork-tipped cigar out of my shirt pocket. Shyla Ryan was slight but not short, five seven or so. Her blonde hair was a close-cropped cap around a pretty face graced with high cheekbones and striking bright blue eyes. She wore a light brown jacket over a snug, longsleeved dark brown top. Her lipstick was the color of her top, making her look even paler than usual. Unlike many her age, she had pierced no parts, at least none I could see. She seemed restless and intense, which was typical of her, and worried, which was not. "What's up?" I asked.

"I need your help," she said.

"Sure," I answered. Flaring a wood match, I lighted my cigar. "What's the story?" I asked, thinking college problems, car problems, maybe boy problems. Here's the windup and now the pitch, a nice high slow one for old Ben to hit out of the park for her.

"My dad's disappeared," she said, fidgeting. "Can you find him for me?"

A few years before, I got asked that a lot. A few years before, the answer was easy. Now the question came rarely, and when it did, it threw up all kinds of red flags. Looking into Shyla's blue eyes, I realized how troubled she was. Damn, I thought. "I'd like to help," I said, exhaling smoke. "But that's really something for the police to deal with."

Her eyes flashed. "You sound like my mother," she said. "I already talked to the police, filed a report. They just shrugged at me." She

leaned forward, slender hands knotted. "I'm sure something awful has happened to Daddy. You've got to help me."

Stalling, I asked, "Well, how long has it been since—"

"Thursday," she said. "He called me Thursday. Said things were getting fixed. He sounded really happy. But after that I heard nothing. Yesterday I went to his place. He hasn't been there. No one's seen him." Taking a cigarette out of her small purse, she put it to her lips, bending forward to accept my light. Nodding her thanks, she took a big hard hit and looked at me, exhaling. "I am so scared, Ben," she said quietly. "He never goes away without letting me know. Never."

"His' place," I said, waving out the wood kitchen match. "Your parents divorced?"

"Separated," she answered. "He moved out four months ago. My mother has been such a bitch to him." She took another drag. "So how about it?" she asked, brightening. "Will you help me?"

Hating myself now, I said, "Wish I could. But I don't do that kind of stuff any more. Been out of it for years."

"But you used to," she pressed. "I heard all about you. Marge has told me things, and Mrs. Janusevicius —"

"Be careful what you believe," I advised. "The stories get wilder in the retelling."

"I heard you were awesome," she said quietly.

I shook my head. "Work with the police, Shyla. This kind of thing, it's their job."

Now she was blinking, and I feared what was coming. "What they said, Marge, and Mrs. J, and the colonel and everybody—what they told me," she said, voice shaking a bit, "is that you always came through for your friends." She stared straight at me, blue eyes shiny. "Aren't I your friend, Ben?"

The cell phone whistled just as I was wheeling my Mustang out of the parking lot. Bracing the wheel with my knee, I jammed the shifter into third with one hand and pressed SND with the other. "Perkins."

"You called?" came Carole's voice.

"Morning, Your Honor," I said, and braced myself. "About tonight."

"Yes?"

"Instead of picking up Rookie at the courthouse, how's about if I swing by your place later, around supptime."

"Works for me," she answered. "But doesn't that take you out of your way?"

"Most likely not. I've got some running around to do up that way today."

Pause. "But it's only nine A.M. now."

"I know," I said hastily. "So, is it —"

"Why don't you just pick her up at the daycare when you're ready? They're open until—"

"Be less pressure," I said, "if we do the handoff up at your house."

Long pause. "What are you up to, Ben?"

Damn. This is what happens, when they've known you for years and have clocked all your moves. I

sighed. "I'm doing some checking up for a friend of mine."

"Now there's a phrase I haven't heard in awhile," she said. "'Checking up.'" From her tone you'd think I'd uttered a most odious obscenity. "What sort of 'checking up,' Ben?"

"Shyla Ryan, woman I work with," I said. "College kid. Temps for Marge in the rental office during breaks. Her dad's dropped out of sight, she asked if I'd do some looking around. I told her I'd help out."

The tension was so tangible I could almost touch it. "God, this scares me," she whispered. "All those familiar terms. 'Dropped out of sight.' 'Looking around.' 'Help out.'"

"Nothing to be scared of," I said. "It's something simple. Trust me."

"You promised to stay out of that work."

"It's not 'work.' I'm not getting paid."

"Don't fence with me!" she flared. "Back then you didn't get paid either, half the time. That didn't stop you from getting stabbed and beaten up and *shot*."

I shook my head. "Nobody's getting shot."

I heard her intake of breath, uncharacteristically shaky. "Is this Shyla person . . . *special* to you?"

Knowing what she was really asking, I replied patiently, "She's a kid. We work together. I know how you feel about this, but . . . I sat there and looked at her and listened to her. In my mind's eye she looked like Rookie twenty years down the line."

I heard her inhale. "How manipulative of you to drag Rachel into this."

"Happens to be the truth," I said mildly.

Another pause. "You won't forget to pick up her tonight," she said.

"I won't forget."

In the background I could hear a female voice. Carole murmured something. To me she said, briskly, "You did promise me, you know. And Rachel, too."

"I know. And I've been keeping it. And I know this nudges it."

"Just so we understand each other. No rough stuff. Promise?"

I took a deep breath. "Promise."

"All right." She sounded cheerier, if only a little. "At least you told me. That's an improvement."

"Yes," I replied. "It is."

Randy Ryan's apartment building was in Bloomfield Township, well north of the city, off Telegraph and Long Lake. It was a long low single story brick structure, capped with a massive layer of icy snow. The eaves were fringed with long, lethal-looking icicles stabbing downward. For Bloomfield, the place seemed low-rent and highly transient. Might as well have put "Divorced Dads Welcome" on their sign out front.

The parking lot sported a white Vette and a blue Crown Vic but no large black Ford Expedition with white fuzzy dice dangling from the mirror. I wedged my Mustang in a parking spot between the Vic and a mountainous pile of plowed snow.

Huddled in my peacoat, fists clenched in pockets for warmth, I crunched across the hard-packed white stuff toward the door of Apartment 3. Already I knew what I'd

find. Second-hand mismatched furniture. Worn appliances. Neutral colors on the walls, the trim, in the carpet. TV and maybe a CD player. And few personal touches except—if Shyla's description of their relationship was any indication—a picture or two of her arm-in-arm with her dad, smiling at the camera.

Five minutes later I left, my expectations fully confirmed. Only there was just one picture, of Shyla alone, probably her high school graduation portrait a couple of years earlier. Her hair had been brown then and longer. She looked younger and more innocent, one to whom less had happened. Same blue eyes, though.

Of Ryan himself there was no recent sign. As Shyla had told me, the sinks were dry, the bed was neatly made, and what looked like several days' worth of mail scattered the foyer carpet. To the front storm door were stuck three yellow tried-to-deliver sticky notes, from UPS or OOPS or somebody like that. The earliest one was dated December thirtieth.

I'd knocked on the other seven doors. The two that answered claimed no knowledge of Randy Ryan, past or present. I reboarded the Mustang and, heat on high, headed south on Telegraph. Normally four lanes each way, Telegraph was down to two narrow lanes now. They were walled with high white drifts that were already turning gray-black from tailpipe crud. The traffic ran slow and sullen, the lights especially lengthy at Quarton and Maple.

Worst of all was the sprawling in-

terchange where Telegraph intertwined with the Reuther and the Lodge freeways. There the cars, the SUV's, and the big rigs crept along in ten foot lurches. They noisily merged and disengaged like icy, metallic, salt-encrusted lovers, tailpipes sending up thick streams of inky exhaust like plummy cats' tails into the frigid midmorning air. I just lived through it, smoking a cigar, playing Buddy Guy's latest on the CD, tolerant, patient. Downright tranquil even. Surely in no hurry to meet Randy Ryan's estranged wife.

"Oh, you," she said, grimacing at me through the storm door. "Jennifer told me about you. Come on in, I guess."

Jennifer? I wondered. Then, as I stepped inside, it clicked. "Thanks for your time," I said. "I'm just wondering if—"

"I know why you're here," Virginia Ryan said, turning on me. Physically, she was quite different from Shyla, besides being older. Short and quite round, lipless and worn, she had short wavy dark hair and deep worry lines. Her eyes were as narrow and hard and colorless as shards of window glass. She wore dark stirrup pants and a light sleeveless shirt. Silver wedding rings twinkled as she gestured. This was, I sensed, a woman who liked to throw things, starting with words and moving on, as needed, to heftier items. "You're trying to find that sorry, sleazebag, soon-to-be-ex-husband of mine."

"No," came another voice as Shyla entered the room. "He's looking

for Daddy. Hi, Ben," she added, giving me a small wave.

"Hey, kid."

The three of us stood, for a moment seemingly immobilized by tension. The living room of the small Redford Township ranch-house was a kaleidoscope of beige: dark, medium, and light. The furniture and decorations were rounded, puffy, and plush. The scent was potpourri and sweetish, with the hint of recently baked bread and remote tobacco smoke. "Can we sit down?" I asked.

"Well," the mother said, "I'm going to. You do what you want." She went to the sofa and sat on its edge, facing me, and hovered over the coffee table. On it was scattered piles of what looked like mail. "As to Randy, I'll tell you the same thing I've told Jennifer." She ripped open an envelope, using considerably more force than needed. "He's taken that money he stole and run off with that hillbilly slut girlfriend of his."

Shyla, who stood in the archway to the dining room, scowled. "That's so unfair. You don't know anything about a girlfriend—"

"I have all the evidence I need," her mother cut in flatly, unfolding an ad.

"And the money thing, too," Shyla charged on, "you don't *know* that. You're just connecting dots. It's what you always do. You sit around and stew about things and—"

"For God's sake!" Virginia snapped, slamming the ad down. "The police were here, Jennifer! Your father's boss has filed a *complaint!*"

"Did you ever get his side of it?" Shyla asked hotly. She was hugging herself, and her blue eyes were a tad glassy. "Of course not. Because you *want* to believe—"

"Whoa!" I interjected, making the T with both hands. "Hold the phone. Steady on, as we say." The women looked at me, expressions eerily identical in their annoyance. "One thing at a time, if we could."

"Who asked you?" Virginia retorted, head cocked at an angry angle.

"I did," Shyla said.

"None of this is any of your business, *Jennifer!*"

"I'm involved in it, too, you know," Shyla replied stubbornly.

"Please," I said, holding up both hands. "Let me get the information I need, and I'll scoot."

Virginia ripped open another envelope and huffed a sigh. "Whatever."

"Okay." I picked through the scraps of facts in my head, framing questions. Or trying to. It had been a long, long time. Surely this was easier years ago. "You mentioned a girlfriend and evidence. What can you tell me about that?"

Virginia gave Shyla a cold smile and a glance. "I found a greeting card she sent him. A sexy greeting card. Left nothing to the imagination."

"Because you went through his briefcase!" Shyla put in. "You always do that, Virginia. Snoop through people's private things."

"He's my husband," her mother answered. "He's not allowed to have secrets from me." Shyla, rolling her eyes, hugged herself tighter and looked away. "So I checked our

phone bills, line by line," Virginia went on, opening another envelope. "There were lots of long distance calls to Georgia. Which makes sense because that's where Plant Two is and Randy calls there a lot. But I found a lot of other Georgia calls, to just one particular number. Place called MO-tee-yay. That's how I found out about *her*."

"I don't buy it," Shyla said airily.

I looked at the mother. "Can you give me the woman's name and number? I'll need to touch base with her."

Virginia shrugged. "You want to waste your time, that's your business."

I looked at her again, seemingly engrossed in a bill of some kind. More there than met the eye. I was pretty sure Shyla was blind to it. To see what I saw, you have to have lived a lot of years, taken a lot of shots. "Now, on this embezzlement thing—"

"*Alleged* embezzlement," Shyla corrected.

"Yes, thank you." Virginia was ignoring me, but I talked to her anyway. "You said a cop came out here? What jurisdiction?"

"Farmington Hills, I think," Virginia said, setting the bill aside. "That's where the main plant is." She picked up a catalogue-sized envelope and shredded the end open. "I don't remember the officer's name." She extracted some papers. "It was so embarrassing," she whispered, "that bastard putting me through this."

Then, staring at the papers in her hands, she froze. "Oh," she said, more to herself than to us, "for

God's sake." Squinting at the papers, she whispered, "He sold it. The son of a bitch *sold* it."

"What?" Shyla asked guardedly.

Virginia looked at her daughter. "The farm!" she answered. "He sold the farm!" Looking at the paper again, she read: "Please consider this formal acknowledgment of the sale of the property located at' blah blah blah." In grim silence she skimmed further. "Two hundred twenty—two hundred twenty-three thousand dollars, less our standard commission of." With a toss she skittered the paper onto the coffee table top and looked up at Shyla with weary anger. "This is your father," she said, tone deceptively mild. "He cheated on me, he stole from his company, and now he's stolen from *us*."

"I don't believe it," Shyla said.

"That was our estate," Virginia murmured. "I'm entitled to half of it as part of the settlement. Now he's run off with it."

"It was in his family," Shyla put in. "It was Daddy's before you married him. You aren't entitled to a dime of it."

"Oh, so you're a lawyer now!" Virginia sneered. "Grow up, little girl. *This* is him," she charged on, waving the letter. "*This* is your father. *This* is what he's about. He's a liar and a cheat and a crook. He betrayed me, and you just wait, he'll betray you, too!"

Raising her head, Shyla replied, "He's the best daddy a girl could ever want."

Though there's no such thing as good timing in a situation like this, to me it seemed like high time to

leave. I rose. "I'd better get going," I told Virginia. "Could I trouble you for the info on that woman down in Georgia?"

After a moment's frozen silence, Virginia got wearily to her feet. "I suppose," she grumped. "Why are you even wasting your time with this? Can't you see what's going on here? Don't you have better things to do?"

Feeling Shyla's eyes on me, I shrugged. "Said I'd help out."

"I suggest," Virginia Ryan said, "that you just let it go."

With a glance at Shyla, who was watching me tensely, I said easily, "Thing about me is, once I get started, I don't quit. Not unless the client waves me off." Some things have changed, I thought. But not that. I looked at Shyla. "Do I keep going?"

"Yes!" Shyla said, fists thrusting upward, beaming at me.

By now the traffic had eased up some. Even so, the massive drifts of snow made Telegraph slow as I motored north. To get to Farmington Hills I needed the Reuther freeway west, and it was once again stop-and-go through the metastatic clover leaves of Reuther/Lodge/ North-western/Telegraph. Turning off Buddy Guy, I used the opportunity to mash out Doreen Mason's 706 area-code number on the cell phone.

"Hah. This is Doh-reen," recited the high, breathy, voice on tape some seven hundred miles south. "Ah cain't tawk now, but if you leave your name, an' your number, Ah'll—" Hitting END, I tossed the cell phone on the bucket seat and returned my full attention to my

driving. I could have left a message, but some creaky old detective instinct told me not to. Better to try again later and catch her off-guard.

At the Farmington Hills police station I was kept waiting for a long time in the dim, stuffy, noisy visitor area. How well I remembered this waiting-around jazz from way back when. Detective work, I recalled, was long stretches of boredom interrupted by extended periods of waiting. Interspersed, at the oddest times, with quick bursts of pure terror, which for me, back then, had been a diseased form of fun. Like the times I almost got garroted, and thonked in the head with a ball bat, and shot in the butt.

But that was then, back in those bad old days of seemingly endless Republican presidents. I'm too old for that now, I told myself. Besides, I swore an oath to Carole and Rachel, the women in my life. No rough stuff. Dragging myself away from the memories, I killed time scoping out the other visitors who drifted in and out of the cop house. Their grumpy demeanor was typical of involuntary visitors. I amused myself trying to determine which were perpetrators, which were perpe-
tratees. And which were both (attorneys, natch) and which were that most dubious and threatened of species, the innocent bystander.

"Mr. Perkins?"

I glanced over at the plain steel door by the counter and nodded. The man, a short, well-built specimen in dark pants and a tieless white shirt, strolled toward me. No smile,

I noticed as I rose. No greeting. No offer of a handshake. Just, "You're here about Randy Ryan?"

"Yes. Appreciate your seeing me, Detective—"

"Shanahan. So where is he?" the cop asked abruptly, hooking hands in his pants pockets.

That caught me off-guard. I studied the lawman briefly. He had very curly dark hair cut quite short, a squarish, flat, cop face with just the faintest of age lines, gray eyes of Navy steel. He was younger than me, which was no surprise, there being, I've noticed, more of those each day.

"That's what I'd like to know," I answered.

He blinked. "What's your interest?"

"His daughter asked me to find him," I replied. The cop said nothing. Remembering that to be a rather effective investigative technique, I made a mental note. "Talk to him lately?"

"Not since Thursday," Shanahan answered. "He was supposed to turn himself in. Never showed."

"So you're charging him?"

"Embezzlement. His employer swore out a complaint."

"How's it look?"

"Dead-bang, man. Couple hundred grand. A slam-dunk." Shanahan seemed to relax just slightly. "Buzz is, he's a bright guy, but no matter how hard I look, I don't see anything all that clever about how he worked it. Dumb stealing from dumber." *Typical*, he could have said but did not have to.

Poor Shyla, I thought. "So you talked to him Thursday?"

"Yeah, he called in. Surprised hell out of me," Shanahan added, looking anything but surprised. "I guess he sensed we were set to scoop him. Said he'd come in voluntarily." He shook his head. "Just a diversionary tactic. I waited till eight, got caught in the snowstorm, missed my kid's hockey game. No sign of Ryan, then or since. From that I am forced to infer that he has skipped."

Which of course made Virginia Ryan's theory look better and better. I thought for a moment. "So I take it you've posted surveillance teams at the airports and train stations and bus stations and—"

"Yeah, right," Shanahan said, with just the faintest smile. "We've put the word out. He'll turn up. He'll bust a red light or get ratted out by a friend or—hey," he said, squinting at me, "maybe you'll even find him. You're some kind of detective, I take it?"

"Used to be."

"Not any more?"

"Nope," I replied, smiling. "Went legit."

Next stop was Ryan's employer's place on Northwestern. Instead of heading there right away, I fired up the Mustang motor to get some heat into the frigid car, and hit SND on the cell phone to redial Doreen Mason's number. While listening to it ring, I looked idly at the phone bill Virginia Ryan had given me. Fully half the entries were highlighted in bright yellow and were virtually identical—to the 706 number in a Georgia town called Motier, which Ryan had pronounced MO-

tee-yay but was actually, I suspected, pronounced Mo-TEER.

"Ah don't wont inny!" came a loud female voice in my ear.

"Ms. Mason?" I asked.

"Will you *leave* me alone," she charged on, accent a foot thick. "I don't buy things on the phone, and I never will, and—"

"I'm not a salesman," I said. "I'm calling about Randy."

Her pause was just a tad too long. "Who?"

"Randy Ryan," I said, and took the plunge, no doubt a bit too precipitously. "Is he there?"

Cell phone static hissed in my ear for a moment. "I don't know who you're talking about," she said. "Who are you?"

"Name's Perkins," I said. "I'm calling from Michigan. I'm looking for Randy." An inspiration came, and I went with it. "His daughter asked me to find him."

"Yeah?" Doreen asked, tone challenging. "His daughter, huh." Pausing she asked abruptly, "What's her name?"

"Shyla."

"No. Her real name," she prodded cagily.

"Jennifer. And her mother's Virginia. And he works for Brighton-Leopold." Or worked, I thought but did not say. "I know the whole deal," I said quietly. "I got your number from Virginia." Doreen did not reply. I sensed she was not all that quick on the uptake. "What made you think I was a salesman?" I asked.

"Caller I.D. said 'anonymous,' " she answered. "That usually means telemarketer." Static hissed again

for a moment, and when Doreen spoke again, she sounded tired. "Randy's not here. I don't know where he is."

Of course she could have been lying. I did not need to hark back to my investigating days to recall that people frequently lie, even when they don't have to. But I decided to go with it for now. "Are you still . . . involved with him?"

"No. He broke it off."

"When?"

"Last week he called."

"When last week?"

"I don't know. Wednesday, Thursday, what does it matter? He called and said it was over, done with. Said he was going away for a long time. Said it was the best for all concerned." With each phrase I heard the emotion welling up in her. Now she paused, and when she spoke again, she sounded steadier, and quite dull. "I told him it was all right. I told him whatever he wanted, whatever was best for him." She sighed. "I've always heard about 'if you love something, let it go.' What they don't talk about is how much it hurts."

I let a silence grow, thinking about what she had said. "So you don't know where he is."

"No, sir."

Keeping my voice easy I said, "Don't know if I buy that, Doreen. I mean, he's flown the coop and took a pot of money with him, and you were his sweetie—"

"Oh, don't get me wrong," she cut in, tone pointed. "If he'd asked me, I'd be with him this instant. He's the sweetest, kindest man. But I knew, somehow I knew all along, it

would never end up that way. And I was right."

I believed her.

"If she'd ever been nice to him," Doreen murmured. "That's all the man ever needed was a little kindness. And love. And acceptance. That's all. If she'd ever given him that, he'd never have looked at me twice. I ain't no prize."

"Not to pick a fight with you but you seem like a very nice person to me."

That brought a hint of warmth, a touch of playfulness to her tone. "Aw, what do you know from all the way up there? Listen . . . when you find him?"

"Yes?"

"Tell him I'm praying for him."

Brighton-Leopold Corp. was one of those downsized, streamlined, New Age companies with no receptionist. The foyer of the large flat anonymous building was in fact empty except for a row of plastic visitor chairs and a table scattered with magazines and literature. A vacant desk bore a phone and a sign saying "Please call the extension of the person you are seeing, and have a seat."

With the sign was a helpful list of about fifty names and extensions. Randy Ryan's name was on it. But there were no titles or positions or helpful hints like, "This guy is Randy's boss." Then I noticed several names in a clump: LEOPOLD N., LEOPOLD P., LEOPOLD T. There being no Brighton listed, I did the next best thing and called the first Leopold.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Leopold?"

"He's in a meeting."

"It's very urgent. It's about Randy Ryan."

"Oh. Surely. Please hold." From the quickening in the young man's voice, I inferred that the mention of Ryan had struck a nerve. I waited. Almost at once the gray steel door buzzed and opened, and a short, roundish man bustled through. As I hung up the phone, the man wheezed, "Where's Randy?"

I stood and said, "Wish I knew, sir. I'm Ben Perkins. You're Mr. Leopold?"

"Neal." His black hair was a bushy black mop around a fleshy face anchored with thick glasses. He wore dark pants and a nondescript dress shirt unbuttoned at collar and cuffs. He had the look of a teddy-bearish absentminded professor, but his eyes were steady and careful as he stuck a pawlike hand out for me to shake. "Have you seen him?"

"No, sir. His daughter asked me to—"

"He'd better move fast," Leopold said. "If you're in touch with him, tell him I can't keep the wolves at bay much longer."

"Wolves?"

"My partners." He looked wounded and anxious, hope fading in his eyes. "When Randy called and said he'd make good, I told my partners, look, he does this and we drop the charges, make it all go away." He sighed. "It's been, what? Four days now? And now you say he's missing?" He stared at me. "I just can't stand up for him for much longer. My partners—"

"I understand," I said, which was not strictly true—it hardly ever is—but saying so usually quiets people down. "So he called you and offered to—"

"Every nickel," Leopold assented, bushy head bobbing. "That's what he said. 'Every nickel' he'd pay back."

"When did he call you?"

Squinting, Leopold counted back. "Thursday." Hm. Seemed to me that day had been mentioned before. Could this be a Clue? Or simply what my friend Raeanne calls a "co-inky-dink"?

Leopold charged on. "He pays the money back, it's all forgiven, see? He keeps his job, it'll all be like it was before. That's what I promised him."

"Seems right generous of you."

Leopold made an it's-nothing gesture with shoulders, hands, a brief bow of his head. "He's like part of the family. We all make mistakes, we all do dumb things. Nothing is stranger than what actually happens. Life goes on—"

"Neal?" came a voice from the door. A mere slip of a young man, shaved nearly bald and wearing white over tan, seemed to slither in. He extended an envelope to his boss and whispered, "Excuse me. Thought you should see this right away."

Leopold took the opened envelope in his big hairy hands and shook out a what looked like a business card. There was also an elongated piece of yellow paper. The owner's eyes squinted at the latter, then widened behind the thick lenses. He positively beamed, hold-

ing the larger item up like a diploma. "He did it!" Leopold crowed.

It was a check. From where I stood, I could not make out the details. The young man said, softly and sibilantly acerbic, "What makes you think it's any good?"

Leopold flipped the check around and read. "Pay to the order of Brighton-Leopold Corp. four hundred ten thousand dollars. Signed, Randy Ryan." The man was positively glowing; I thought he might do a jig right there. "Of course it's good," he said to the younger man. "He said he'd come through, and he did. End of discussion." Turning to me, Leopold seized my hand. With a slight bow, he pumped it hard, as if I'd had anything to do with anything. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

"Well, sir, I—"

"And when you find Randy," Leopold commanded, letting go and pointing at me like the I WANT YOU poster, "you tell him it's time to come home now."

But he was still missing. Which, in light of what had just happened, made no sense.

But then little in this work ever does. *This* part I remembered all too well.

I sat in the icebox Mustang, running the engine to warm it up. Flurries fell on the flat snow-covered plain, adding insult to icy injury. Just past the parking lot, beyond a mountain of freshly plowed snow, trucks crept along 10 Mile Road. Why? I asked myself. Why do I still live in Michigan? More to the point, why am I out here in the bit-

ter snowy cold, twisted around a mental axle trying to figure out this Randy Ryan mess? Where I should be is back in my warm, pleasant, Norwegian Wood maintenance office. In full control of my own little world. Listening to 'ABX and drinking coffee and smoking cigars.

But . . . I had promised.

So get on with it, stupid.

Now. The central theory had been that Randy Ryan had absconded with a pile of embezzled money, perhaps into the arms of his girlfriend in Georgia. That theory was now inoperative. So where was he?

At times like this, when your Big Theory goes poof, the only thing to do is start over with what you know for sure. In sequence. Think orderly for once, I told myself. When did Shyla last hear from her dad? Thursday, she had said this morning, I was sure of it.

On Randy's apartment door, the oldest UPS delivery sticky note was dated . . . December thirtieth, which was . . . Thursday. So he had not been back there since.

Then there was Doreen Mason. I was pretty sure she had told me it was Thursday when Randy called her to break off their affair. What about Shanahan, the detective? He'd said that Randy had promised to turn himself in on Thursday. And when Randy called Neal Leopold to tell him he was making things right, that had been last Thursday, right? Correct.

Thursday, Thursday, Thursday. All these things in one day this was not just a "co-inky-dink." Back there in Leopold's office I had heard a tinny little ringing in my ear—that

long-dormant detective instinct saying, this is something important, pay attention, idiot.

And every one of the contacts he had made had been by phone. The logical question was, from where had he called? How could I find out?

Ah yes.

Clenching the smoldering cigar in my teeth, I picked up the cell phone and mashed SND. Ringing, then *click*, and the taped answering spiel started. I overrode with "Doreen, pick up, please? It's Ben again."

Click. "Well hello there," she purred. "I was hoping you'd call back."

Nice as it is to be come on to, I had no time for flirting, or interest in it, either. "Well, I need a bit more information if you don't mind. About Randy."

"Uh-huh," she replied, resigned.

"When was it he called you? To, uh—"

"To dump me?" she supplied, tone patient. "Um. Let's see. Thursday, that's right. I know because I went to a New Year's Eve-Eve party, and —"

"This is important. Where did he call you from?"

"I don't know. He didn't say."

"Doreen, please," I said patiently. "You have Caller I.D., right?"

"That's right!" She seemed surprised to hear this. "It's in the kitchen, that's why I didn't see it when he called."

"Can you check it for me now and tell me where he called from?" I asked.

"Okay." Fumbling noises and

then she said, "Hope it's still in here. I get a lot of calls, it might have . . . let's seeeee . . ." Long pause, silence. "Well, this must be it," she said. "It's the only one I don't recognize from Thursday."

"Read it to me," I said, groping paper and pen out of my glovebox.

"Redemp Eee See," she said slowly and then recited a phone number in the 248 area code. "What the heck is that? And where the heck is 248?"

Redemption Episcopal Church is on Quarton Road in Bloomfield Township, several blocks east of Telegraph. I got there during lunch hour but luckily found the lone office worker eating a sandwich at her desk. I hadn't gotten half my question out of my mouth when she started shaking her head. "You'll need to see Father Dave about that," she said, not unkindly.

"Is he here?"

"He should be free." She put down her sandwich. "Come along."

I followed her down a narrow hallway to the end office. It was all glass on one wall, bookshelves on the others. Its occupant rose to greet me as we entered. He was evidently a person of the cloth. But you would not have known it from his dark Dockers pants and open-necked pale blue polo shirt. He also looked way too young to be a priest. "Dave Collins," he said, shaking hands with a very firm grip and a very direct look in the eye. "How can I help you?"

"Ben Perkins," I said as the office worker stepped out, clicking the door shut behind her. "I'm here

about one of your, uh . . . congregation people."

"A parishioner?" Collins asked, eyebrow arched. "Please, have a seat."

Okay, I was nervous, as I always am around people with a direct line to God. I sat on a sofa under the light of a floor lamp. Had it not been on, we'd have both been in deep shadows. The light from outside had dimmed considerably in the darkening sky. Looked like another storm, I thought.

"Yes, a parishioner," I said as Collins sat down in his desk chair, facing me. "Randy Ryan."

"Mm," the reverend said, expression placid, not at all wary.

Not knowing how much to tell him, I stuck with the essentials. "He's missing. Hasn't been seen since Thursday."

"Oh no."

"Unless, of course, you've heard from him."

"No, I have not."

"But you saw him that day, right?"

Collins considered that. "What is your interest, if I may ask?"

"His daughter asked me to find him."

"You're a detective?"

"Not hardly. Just a friend, helping a friend out."

"I see."

He said nothing. Neither did I until it occurred to me that he had ducked my question. "You saw Randy last Thursday, right? I know he was here, he made a phone call from here." And maybe more than one, I realized.

"Thursday, Thursday," Collins

murmured. "Yes, of course. The day of the big storm."

"Whatever." I felt that incomparable rush that you get when you're onto something. "What was he here about?"

The priest tipped his head back a bit, watching me, expression kind, perhaps even a bit amused. "You know I can't talk about things like that, Ben," he answered. "And besides, it's not really what you need to know."

I wanted to retort, Look, you be the preacher and I'll be the detective, okay? But that would have been impertinent. I did my best to smile back. "Then what is it I really need to know, Father?"

"Where he was headed when he left here. And I can tell you that." He smiled. "Home."

Another fond hope blown to bits. I mean, after seeing Neal Leopold I thought I had figured out what Randy's deal was. I hoped, upon meeting Father Dave, that he would confirm it. Instead he felt obliged to play coy and sent me ricocheting back into the icy outdoors on yet another wild goose chase. "Home," my Aunt Lizzie's butt. No way did Randy go home last Thursday after seeing the padre. He had not been back there. I was sure of it.

Even so, I wheeled north toward Randy's Long Lake apartment. Might as well check it out again. Nothing else to do. I felt fatigue in my legs and back, a numbing of the spirit, the sour taste of having been laughed at. This was such a joke. I never liked going over the same unfruitful ground a second and

third time. It always meant that I'd missed something. Had been less than brilliant. Had been, as Rae-anne likes to say, "a mere mortal."

Feeling sour, I smoked a cigar. I went over Randy's chronology again, probing for soft spots. Propelled the Mustang north in the thick Telegraph Road traffic, piloting along between the high walls of plowed blizzard snow. Did the litany, each time ending up with "home." Which made no sense.

Unless.

What if home did not mean Randy's apartment? What if home meant Redford Township, where he'd lived with Virginia and Shyla?

Well now. This was more interesting. And it made all kinds of sense, given the other things Randy had done that day. But if he had gone there, Virginia would have mentioned it. Wouldn't she?

But she had not. Why not?

Perhaps because . . . because something really ugly had happened?

Availing myself of a median cross-over, I switched sides to southbound Telegraph and motored along, Redford-bound. I made fairly good time despite the old snow, new snow, and traffic. I thought about Virginia's flinty eyes, the set of the scowl on her face, the tone of utter contempt and loathing in her voice as she spoke of her errant husband. The sense I had had that this was a woman who threw things with grim purpose and deadly aim. I remembered how she had tried repeatedly to wave me off the case. Oh, my imagination did all kinds of things as the big Mustang wheels ate up

several snow-packed miles. I pictured Virginia aiming a pistol. Randy going down. Blood splattering a beige wall. His body wrapped in plastic, entombed under a snow-covered pile of boards behind the garage . . .

Of course the scenario was dumb and obvious, but most real-life murders are just that. I played around with different elements as Tel-Twelve Mall approached. This was always one of the worst traffic choke-points in all of metro Detroit, and today was no exception. As the traffic lurched along in its stop-and-go fashion, I wound back the tape in my mind and replayed how it might have gone down. Randy leaving the church, inspired, fervent, anxious to get to her. Motoring south on Telegraph, just as I was doing. Except that this had been Thursday afternoon when the blizzard hit, the big Alberta Clipper, right? So he was in a hurry, trying to get there before everything shut down. He had come flying along here and—

And just as I was doing now, Randy had approached the interlocking cloverleaves where Telegraph met Reuther Freeway/Lodge Freeway/Northwestern Highway.

But Thursday there had not been snowpack on the macadam and lines of crawling cars and walls of plowed snow on both sides and flurries flying in the air. Thursday had been, as Father Dave had said, “the day of the storm.” The Alberta Clipper had struck right about the time Randy barreled south on Telegraph. There had been a howling wind and snow pouring down like porridge.

The pavement had slickened up, and there’d been nothing on the sides of the road to stop him from—

And that’s when it came to me.

Leaning forward, gripping the deep-dish Mustang wheel, I stared through the windshield. I thought about angles and distances and timing, the vastness of the cloverleaf. The great expanses of open land with its slopes and gullies and blind spots. I thought about Virginia Ryan again, too, but this time there was no gun in her hand, as I knew in my heart there had never been.

Hitting the brakes, I halted the Mustang in the left-hand lane, right in the middle of the cloverleaf. Traffic continued to pass on my right. I mashed the four-way lights, shut off the engine, and got out.

Instantly the wind tried to bite me through. I turned up the collar of my peacoat and buttoned it tight and jammed the cell phone in my back pocket. The wall of snow rose eight feet or more, a slanting slope of grayish white interspersed with big black icy chunks. Bracing myself, I began to climb up the wall of icy snow, virtually on all fours, freezing my hands as I clambered up, shoes slipping, fingers freezing as I fought for purchase.

I was halfway up when a male voice hollered from down below. “Hey, moron!”

Looking down, I saw a big beefy guy leaning through the window of his white Olds Intrigue. “What’re you doing parking there, ya idiot? Jamming up all the traffic here!”

“Got business,” I called back. “Possess your soul in patience. Jack-

ass," I added, just for his information.

"You move that damn car," he bawled, "or I'll rearrange your face for ya!"

I hesitated. From inside came that dark chuckling feeling I remembered so well, the feeling of *all-righty-then, let's party*. And I thought about going back down there and dragging him through the window and using him for a pogo stick or something.

But "no rough stuff," Carole had said.

And I had promised.

And all the man wanted was a clear ride home.

So I grinned and waved. "Back in a minute," I called and, with final scrambling effort, propelled myself over the summit of the snowdrift and down the other side.

Stretched out before me was a rising snowy plain, truly tundra as far as I could see, unmarked by anything, manmade or otherwise. I was calf-deep in the icy white stuff, but down here it was loose and wet, biting like frozen fingers through the soles and sides of my utterly inappropriate shoes. My enthusiasm for my brainstorm began to wane. I mean, there was no evidence here, none that I could see. Unless you looked a certain way at the surface of the snow. Was there an unnatural unevenness there? Kind of like faint ruts, way way down? Hard to tell, especially in the gray light with flurries angling down. We'd gotten, after all, twenty-one inches of snow on Thursday. Plenty enough to cover his tracks if he'd come skidding through here early enough.

But where would he have ended up?

The slope rose and then crested. From here I could not see what was beyond it. Quelling one more urge to turn around and get back into the nice warm Mustang, I tromped uphill through the knee-deep snow. It packed its way up under my pants cuffs and down into my shoes, causing my feet and lower legs to dampen and then numb. Hugging myself, I forced myself ahead, eyes on the prize, the crest of the slope. Beyond was a whole lot more white nothing. But this was a downslope, with several intermediate mounds, leading to what looked like a gully and another hill beyond. Amazing that this vast open area could exist here in the heart of a cloverleaf. Invisible to anyone passing by, especially with those walls of plowed snow alongside the roads.

Following the path of least resistance, I marched down the slope, aiming for the halfway point between two of the intermediate mounds. My legs were now numb from the knees down. The wind had picked up and was waging a serious attack on my coat. I hunched as I tromped along, hands fisted in the coat pockets. My chin was buried in the collar, mouth muttering monotonous oaths on the general theme of *the things I do, the things I do*. The snow fell thicker and dusk did, too. I did not realize how bad my vision was getting until I was barely twenty feet from the thing.

It was the first manmade object I'd encountered. It was a large, slanted rectangle, white, of course,

being covered with snow except for just a black tip up high, the right angle of what appeared to be a rear fender.

My breath caught in my throat. Incipient hypothermia forgotten, I spread my arms and ran, high-stepping. The vehicle was nose-down, thrust like a blunt spear into what had to have been a sharp depression in the ground. Of course I could not tell that for sure, given the drifts of snow. As I drew nearer, I could see the whitish faint outlines of a rear wheel and a roofline. The ghostly silhouette of an urban assault vehicle, perhaps of the Ford Expedition variety.

Panting, I thrashed to a stop at the vehicle and brushed at the window. Peering in, I squinted long and hard. As my vision adjusted to the deeper dimness, I could just barely make out the interior white fuzzy dice hanging crazily from the sideways rear view mirror and, on the passenger side, the faint, crumpled outline of a body.

"So, it's true then," Shyla murmured, eyes downcast. "He did do all those things Virginia said."

"'Fraid so," I replied.

We stood in a hallway of the emergency room at Metro Detroit General. Around us bustled orderlies and nurses and people pushing gurneys bearing bodies, not all of them animate. The closed door in front of us said EXAM ROOM 2. NO ADMISSION. I was finally starting to thaw out and was leaving little puddles of melted snow on the linoleum floor around me.

Shyla shivered in her coat and

hugged herself, half turned from me. "But why?" she asked softly.

I shrugged. "He's just a man. People do bad things sometimes. It's what happens." I could relate. I thought, but did not say, that Randy Ryan had shown all the signs of a man who had gotten just so sick of himself. I could relate to that, too.

"What's important," I added, "is he was turning things around, trying to make things right."

The young woman's pale face crumpled, and she tottered to me, engulfing herself in a big hug. "It's just so unfair!" she murmured into my neck through sobs. "Now he won't get the chance to finish the job."

I patted her back. "Don't be too sure of that, kid. Doc says he's got a fighting chance of—"

"Is this the room?" came a voice from behind me. We turned to see Virginia Ryan approaching, hatless, wearing a dark winter coat, short dark hair askew, lipless face pale, eyes icy as the outside. "Where is he?"

"What are you doing here, Virginia?" Shyla asked, disengaging from me.

"Your detective friend called me," the mom said. "Which is only right, since I'm still your father's wife, Jennifer. Surprised?"

Shyla's eyebrows arched. "Not that Ben called you," she said. "Surprised you'd care enough to show."

Virginia stepped closer to us and glanced at the door.

"How is he?"

"He's in a coma," I answered. "Way dehydrated. Core temp is low. But in a way the freezing cold ac-

tually helped him. Retarded the bleeding from his crash injuries.”

“Will he live?” Virginia asked evenly.

“They won’t say for sure, naturally,” I answered. “Even if he does, he might lose some—”

The exam room door opened, and a nurse looked out at us. “Ms. Ryan?” Both women stepped forward. “Only one at a time,” the nurse commanded.

Shyla shot her mom a look. “Can I go first, Mother?” she asked.

“Very well, Shyla.”

The daughter went inside and closed the door. For long moments the mother and I just stood there. I could not help wondering if they were giving up on him in there, if I had been too late, with all my banging around and rookie mistakes. What Virginia was thinking was anyone’s guess. Presently she asked with the usual abruptness, “Well, are you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what, ma’am?”

“What he was doing up there. How he got in this fix.”

“Well, before the crash, he’d been to see his priest.”

“Confessing all?” Virginia asked, trying to sound hard and cynical and not quite succeeding.

“Don’t know about that,” I answered easily. “I do know about some of the other things he did while he was with Father Dave. If you’re ready to hear.”

She stared at me. “Well?”

I looked at her. Ready or not, I thought, here it comes. “Well, from Father Dave’s office he called his lady friend in Georgia and told her it was over. He called his boss to tell

him he’d be making restitution for the money he stole. He called Detective Shanahan to tell him he was turning himself in. He called Shyla to tell her everything was getting fixed.” Virginia’s expression did not change. I thought my words were just bouncing off her, bouncing off the armor of her preconceived notions. “I know these things for a fact.”

“And then,” she said, “he took off from there, headed for the airport. He was blowing town. He did all that stuff to throw everyone off the scent—”

“That’s one way to connect the dots,” I cut in. “But there’s another way.”

She was looking at me intently now. “Yes?”

“Number one, if he were headed for the airport, he’d have turned west. Instead, he kept going south. You know where he was bound for, Virginia. You know it in your heart.”

“Where?” she asked, voice small.

“To your house. To see you. My guess is, to beg for your forgiveness.”

Just then came Shyla’s voice from inside the exam room: “Yes!”

Virginia blinked. Her throat worked. She cupped her mouth with a hand that trembled. I reached for the doorknob and opened the door. With a last glance at me, Virginia dashed through, and the door eased shut again.

Suddenly alone, I stared at the closed door. Reached out for the knob again, hesitated, let my hand drop. Under these circumstances the last thing they needed was me

hanging around. I had never felt so suddenly useless. For a moment the unfairness of it blazed in my mind. Over already? Where was the applause, the admiration, the attaboys? Where were the simple thanks, for heaven's sake?

But this too I remembered from the old days. The better the job you've done for a client, the less you exist for them when the job is over.

Once they're out of the woods, clients make haste to forget how desperate they were for your help. It's just human nature.

But that was okay, I thought as I headed for the exit. I had, after all, promises to keep and better things to do. Such as go home and change out of my wet clothes and then pick up the girl of my dreams from her daycare.

SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":

Hope Latour stabbed Gina Kupper.

FLOOR	HUSBAND AND WIFE	JOB	STATE
5	Carl and Irma Morris	agent	Wyoming
4	Earl and Gina Kupper	editor	Utah
3	Adam and Jane Osmund	cabby	Tennessee
2	Bert and Faye Napier	baker	Texas
1	Dave and Hope Latour	dealer	Virginia

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the July-August issue.

All too frequently widowers—particularly those whose male libido outweighs their wisdom—remarry in haste. So it was with King Grayor White of Storyland. Enamored of a woman of exceptional beauty and certain (here unspecified) talents, he made her his new queen, completely overlooking her tendency to hold unsettling conversations with her mirror. But the queen's murderous moods were evident to Princess Lily White, herself blossoming into the fullness of maidenhood. Fearing her stepmother's jealousy, she fled into the forbidding Dark Forest.

Far from the ameliorating influences of civilization—that is, without access to hairdresser appointments or microwave pizza—she came upon a small cottage. When her knock elicited no response, the princess timidly entered. Everything inside was as neat as an unused pin. On one side were seven tiny beds; on the other, a low table with seven diminutive chairs. Exhausted by her arduous journey, she lay down and fell asleep.

She was awakened by the tramping of seven pairs of size two boots. Into the cottage trooped seven little white-bearded men, each only three feet tall. They hung their caps of different colors—red, orange, yellow, brown, green, blue, and purple—on little wooden pegs. Lily noticed that although their suits included these same colors no man wore a suit matching the color of his cap. She also noted that each man had distinctive features.

Unaware of her presence, the little men set about their customary household chores.

The bald one swept the floor; the one wearing eyeglasses dusted the furniture; the one with bushy eyebrows started a cosy fire in the fireplace; the one with the red nose diced roots and herbs for supper; the one with the roly-poly tummy began doing laundry; and the one with floppy ears set the table.

The last little man, who had a mischievous grin, was evidently the bedmaker, for he began fluffing pillows. Suddenly he recoiled. "Help, brothers!" he called out. "Somebody's in our beds, and from my viewpoint she's decidedly feminine!"

The others gathered round, muttering, "Invasion of our personal

space!" "Disrupting our bonds of ethnic brotherhood!" and "Violation of the First Amendment!"

"Hold it, fellows," exclaimed Lily. "I'm alleviating your extreme gender imbalance, and *this* is my thanks? Get serious! Who are you guys anyway?"

The one with floppy ears replied, "Our names are Arley, Bubbly, Cholly, Dudley, Everly, Folly, and Golly. We are known throughout the forest as the Seven Colossal Giants."

"Giants?" sniffed Lily. "Why, you are mere dwarves."

"We have colossal spirit and intellect," retorted the little man. "Therefore, among forest folk we are giants. And who might you be, you stature-biased female?"

"I'm Princess Lily White," she answered. Whereupon she told them about her potentially lethal stepmother.

The Seven Colossal Giants huddled aside. After much mumbling the leader declared, "Very well, you may stay and sleep in our nearby sauna. But no polluting the environment with discarded Kleenex! And no laundering undies in our sink!"

The following morning Lily inquired, "What do you guys do for a living?"

"Come along," invited Cholly with a sly wink. They all marched farther into the Dark Forest, halting at a still in a little clearing.

"You're bootleggers!" exclaimed Lily. "Probably hiding out from my daddy's tax collectors. What's that foul liquid you're brewing?"

"We call it White Lightning."

"White Lightning, eh? Using the royal name without permission. Well, since you've been so hospitable in my time of need, I guess it's okay."

The Seven Colossal Giants lined up. As each passed the vat, he added his carefully measured ingredient: camomile, ginger, bergamot, cinnamon, mustard, sassafras, and horseradish. "Let'er age five minutes," ordered Dudley, "then start distilling."

As the sparkling liquid dripped from the copper tubing, he handed a tin cupful to Lily. "Whew! Not bad!" she declared, wiping her watering eyes.

Meanwhile, back at the castle, the evil stepmother's magic mirror (an insidious, privacy-invading device) informed her of Lily's whereabouts. Disguising herself as an age-advanced, poverty-stricken woman, the queen set forth with poisoned apples.

Arriving at the cottage, she cackled, "Try a free, organically grown apple, dearie. No endorsement required."

"Okay, lady," said Lily, "but first sample our special brew."

After one cupful the stepmother mumbled, "Mmmmirror, mmm-mirror on the wall—"

"That's no mirror," Lily said. "Just a sex-exploiting calendar belonging to the Colossal Giants. You sound like my stepmother."

Mellowed by the Giants' brew, the stepmother confessed her dastardly plot.

"Suddenly I love everybody!" she giggled. "Tell me about your giant friends, sweetie."

Princess Lily White explained:

(1) Arley, Bubbly, and Cholly, none of whom wears the brown cap, include the red-nosed cook, the brother in the brown suit, and the one who adds mustard to the brew. Arley doesn't wear the orange suit or the red cap. Bubbly doesn't add horseradish or cinnamon to the brew.

(2) Golly, the brother who sets the table, and the one wearing the brown cap have red, yellow, and green suits. Golly (who doesn't add ginger to the brew) isn't the one who sweeps the floor (whose cap isn't blue). The brother in the green suit doesn't make beds. The one who sets the table (who doesn't add ginger to the brew) doesn't wear the green cap.

(3) Dudley (who doesn't add camomile to the brew), his brother in the purple suit, and the one in the yellow cap (whose suit isn't brown) build the fire, do the laundry, and sweep the floor. Dudley's cap isn't green.

(4) The three adding sassafras, cinnamon, and horseradish to the brew include Everly (who is neither the one who sets the table nor the one in the purple suit), the brother in the orange suit, and the one who dusts the furniture. Folly neither dusts furniture nor does laundry.

(5) The Colossal Giant in the yellow suit, his brother who does the laundry, and the one adding cinnamon to the brew wear caps of orange, green, and purple. Neither the one in the yellow suit nor the one doing laundry adds mustard to their marvelous brew.

(6) The orange suit doesn't belong to Dudley or the one in the brown cap. The blue suit isn't worn by the one in the red cap.

(7) Bergamot isn't added by the brother who makes the fire or by the one wearing the orange cap. The brother adding horseradish (who doesn't make beds) doesn't wear the brown suit.

Princess Lily was interrupted by the bald Colossal Giant, who rushed in breathless and exclaimed, "Please hurry! During an argu-

ment my brother in the blue suit tossed another brother into the vat! It will ruin the whole batch!"

Lily ran to the still and quickly fished out the victim by his floppy ears. Her stepmother applied a miniature Heimlich Maneuver, and soon the wet and bedraggled brother recovered—except for blowing odd-shaped bubbles for several days.

The Colossal Giants were so grateful they invited the reformed stepmother to stay. She graciously declined but appointed the Seven Colossal Giants the Royal Distillers. In this manner Princess Lily and the now-friendly queen ruled over a *very* happy realm. (The king hasn't sobered up yet.)

Who tossed whom into the vat?

See page 83 for the solution to the May puzzle.

.....
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LIN PO AND DRAGON'S BLOOD



B. H. Schrier

Toward evening the rain chilled to sleet and the crazy cobbled streets glazed with ice, too slippery for riding a bicycle. Lin Po's thighs were soaked. Water ran down his neck as he pushed the handlebars, threading his way through stalled traffic in the wintry darkness. He heard the impatient piping of an ambulance approaching.

Around the next turn he came upon a frantic scene. At a construction site a heavy steel scaffold had fallen, blocking the street. There was one

officer on duty, a woman from Traffic Control. He parked his bike and took charge, diverting traffic around the jammed intersection, making room for the ambulance.

Three persons were carried off in it. When a team arrived from the local precinct, Lin looked for the construction boss, who labored with his crew to disassemble the wreckage and clear the street.

Lin Po was off duty, but he felt it his duty to ask a question or two. "What was the cause of this, in your opinion?"

The boss, and Lin Po did not ask his name, snarled, "It is enough just clearing the accursed street. Who has time to look for excuses?" His hard hat dripped little icicles, and he did not stop his labors but helped two other men lift a section of scaffolding into a heavy truck.

Rebuffed, Lin Po went to the base of the scaffold, where it was obvious the incident had begun. The pipe scaffold had fallen four stories in a crazy twisted shape. With his flashlight Lin Po examined each joint that had separated and the mud nearby.

The scaffold was made with heavy steel pipes assembled with steel pins, the pins held in place by "keeper" rings. There were eight places where the pipes had come apart, and those eight sockets were empty of pins. Look as he might, Lin found no place where the pins had fallen to the mud. The eight pins had disappeared or never existed.

When a local deputy inspector arrived, Lin Po introduced himself and was excused from further service. He arrived at his mother's home a full hour late.

Lin Po removed his shoes. "I'm sorry, Mother." He wiped his bicycle with a rag and brushed the tires clean, removing every trace of mud and water before taking it inside. She shut the door, and the smoke of smoldering joss sticks stopped wavering above the altar table.

"It's all right. I wasn't finished with the floors anyway. I always like to have the house spotless for the New Year." She spread newspaper just inside the door, and he rolled the cycle onto it.

"It's getting colder. There was ice." He crossed his arms, tucking his hands in his armpits, but his uniform was damp and offered no warmth. "A regrettable accident where they are building the People's Bank, and I had to stop."

She offered him a towel and a robe. "Someone was hurt? How sad to start the year in such a way. Some hot tea for my son? You are ready for supper, I should think."

"Yes, thank you, Mother." He sat crosslegged at the round table. "Two were killed. A scaffold fell."

"Not unexpected, though." She brought his soup, a large bowl of noodles with fish balls. "Everyone knows they shouldn't build in that place. Bad fung shui."

He grasped his mother's hand and smiled. "So now you are a fung shui expert. But maybe those who put up the scaffold were in a hurry."

Maybe one was drunk, or stupid with hunger and cold. We still have hunger, Mother, despite what you read."

"Don't argue with your mother. No one would build a tomb in that place. The intersection lies low and wet, on the north side of the hill. Always there are accidents there, in the street. Not so long ago, it is said, a gibbet stood at the crossroads, where criminals were hanged until the birds picked out their eyes. Why, just last year—sit, my son. I'll serve you—"

"No, Mother. You sit. I'll pour the tea."

They ate without speaking until Lin Po looked up, wanting to break the silence. "You will say nothing of this, Mother, but I think the two were murdered."

"Oh my! Don't speak of such things at my table." She made a sign to chase evil away.

"I'm sorry. I will say no more. The problem is, I can't prove the crime. I don't even have a suspect."

That night he slept in his mother's house, and he dreamt of fish. Two talking fish.

"The Ninth District is far outside your jurisdiction." Chief Inspector Yu was clearly unhappy. "Have you so little to do, Deputy Lin, that you must make work for yourself?"

"I have plenty to occupy my time, chief inspector. But I was the first officer at the scene, and the third victim is yet close to death—"

"And therefore you feel compelled to make a report." The chief unwound a rubber band from a pack of cigarettes. The rubber band served as a small reminder that he wished to stop smoking. "Unless I err, you were actually off duty, on holiday leave at the time?" He did not take a cigarette but held the pack in both hands and stared at it.

"On my way to my mother's house, actually."

"Ah. Inspector Koon will be pleased to receive your gratuitous observations, especially since they are the direct opposite of his. Inspector Koon, I remind you, is brother-in-law to a judge of the People's Court. A very powerful family." He returned the pack to his pocket.

"Yes, I know. I have not seen Inspector Koon."

"I suggest you renew your acquaintance with the inspector before you present this report for distribution. Perhaps you will see a way in which you can avoid being assigned to an outpost in farthest Mongolia. Remember what happened to Won Wai." He waved his hand in dismissal. "And before you release that report, be sure it bears my chop."

"Thank you, chief inspector."

Won Wai would not be forgotten by any who had known him. Twelve years and the man was still in Mongolia, in Kashgar, at the far edges of the Mongolian desert, a lone Han among Muslims who drank tea with butter in it. Such is the fate of one who questions his superiors.

*

She greeted him at the top of the stair. "What a surprise, to see my son twice in the same week!"

"I'm sorry, Mother. Didn't you get my message?" Once more Lin Po cleaned and dried his bicycle.

The little round woman peered across the street. "Here comes the messenger now, that loafer! He knows not to expect a tip from me, so he waits in the comfort of the tavern until you come, to make his delivery."

But the courier was not entirely moved by greed. "Deputy Inspector Lin Po? I have a message, to your hands only." Then he turned to Lin's mother. "Have also one for you, Grandmother." He received a tip, after all, but from Lin Po's hand.

The message was from Inspector Koon, Ninth District, and Lin Po read it the second time aloud: "Deputy inspector: I have been informed that you will be in my district on personal business, and I would be honored if you would stop by my office, at your convenience, of course."

"Isn't that nice, so polite." His mother shuffled to the kitchen. "Inspector Koon must be a very nice man."

"Or a very angry one. Maybe he is too polite." But Koon couldn't have heard from Lin Po. He had never sent his report to anyone. Only his own chief inspector could have mentioned the report. A chill cramped his stomach.

"Mother, what is the gossip about the construction accident, first day of New Year?"

"Oh, the usual, you know. Some say that Lo Pan, god of carpenters, has been offended, since steel was used instead of the traditional bamboo scaffolding. Others point to the red soil that was found in the diggings, saying it is dragon's blood. No priest was called when the dragon was disturbed, which is the height of foolishness as anyone will tell you."

"And what do you say, Mother?"

"Same I said to you. Bad fung shui, that place."

Lin Po could not bring himself to accuse his mother of betraying a confidence. But he slept poorly, worrying about the meeting with Inspector Koon. And once again the two talking fish appeared in his dreams.

Unlike his peers in other precincts Koon made his office on the first floor of the police building. This was not, as it appeared, from a desire to keep close watch on his officers. No, the building was old, and the district prone to earthquakes. Koon had cut a private exit door, quite near his desk, leading directly to the street.

Lin Po was admitted at once without waiting. This was a good sign as was Inspector Koon's smile.

"Ah, deputy inspector. Welcome to our little corner of the world." He looked at his receptionist. "Some tea, quickly." Another good sign. After sitting, Koon plunged at once into his subject.

"You were the first officer at the scene of an accident in the time of the New Year? Of course you were. I spoke with your chief inspector recently. He suggested that since you would be here on leave to visit your mother it might be rewarding if we chatted more about your—ah—observations at the time. There has been much public sensation around this unfortunate affair but very little hard evidence."

This was *not* a good sign, since he had no hard evidence. The tea arrived.

"You may not be aware that, on the next day after the accident, a letter was posted to the chief architect." Koon waved a paper with hand-linked characters.

"I was not aware, no, sir."

"This letter, not signed, claims responsibility for the tragedy, which makes it a double murder at the very least." He passed the letter across the desk. Lin Po pulled on cotton gloves. Written in the stiff, formal manner of long ago, the letter was addressed to Architect Sim, stating that the construction disturbed sacred ground and politely threatening more accidents until work was stopped and the soil replaced. He held the sheet to the light. There was a faint smudge of bright red on the reverse side in a lower corner.

"Inspector, when the victims were taken away, I examined the scaffold. It collapsed from one side only, coming apart at the bottom, but few pipes had buckled. I looked for the metal pins that secure these pipes to each other, expecting to find they had sheared from excessive stress. I found no pins at all in that first section."

"None?" The inspector had a way of scowling whenever he asked a question, a manner which would upset any witness.

"Eight pins were missing, inspector. It hardly seems possible that I could miss finding even one of eight pins, or their broken remains, despite the mud."

Koon smiled. "I knew our meeting would be profitable. By the time we received this letter, the scaffolding had been taken apart and any footprints destroyed."

Again he scowled. "Your chief inspector suggested that because of your excellent reputation in dealing with superstitious people you might consent to look into this matter with us while you are here. Of course, we don't wish to take you from your mother . . ."

"I shall be happy to offer my services. But I must have the official approval of—"

The inspector smiled. "I have already received the approval of your chief, in writing. Deputy Chiang is in charge of the investigation. His office is on the third floor, rear."

Chiang was an older man wearing a dirty shirt and a harried scowl. He favored a limp and a narrow mustache that straggled to his chin,

and he watched Lin Po approach from the edge of his eyes. Lin Po told his story quickly, trying not to make a judgment about the man's slovenly ways.

Chiang sighed. "So, it was deliberate. My hope was that the letter was a prank. Now we have another nasty tangle and the promise of more paperwork." He gathered a sheaf of paper and slapped it to his desk.

"You have examined the letter," said Lin Po. "Did you notice the reverse side?"

Chiang's eyes turned opaque. "I noticed the brushwork, which was not done by a scholar. There was nothing written on the back."

"No. Nothing written." A thought struck Lin, and he was silent, thinking.

Chiang snarled. "You are still here? I should think you'd have done enough, for one day."

"Sorry, Chiang." He omitted the man's title. "I will speak to the architect and give you a report. Until tomorrow, then?" He didn't wait for a response because his anger lay too close to his mouth.

Sim and the project manager waited for him, not in their generous and comfortable offices but in a large room filled with drawing boards and busy draftsmen. The two were most polite at first, answering Lin Po's questions with smiles.

"Have there been other threats like this?" he asked.

Sim smiled. "Actually, yes. Two other letters were brought to my attention a week or so before the tragedy. I reported them, of course."

Lin Po recognized Sim as the man in the hard hat at the accident scene. "The police were advised?"

"Actually, no, I told the bureau's directors. No offense, deputy inspector, but no one likes to disturb our busy police department. You understand—"

"The law requires that such matters of public safety must be reported." Lin Po's face was a blank. "But for your thoughtfulness the tragedy might have been prevented. Where are these other letters?"

"I have them ready for you," and he gave Lin Po an envelope, "with copies of my correspondence, giving the dates they were received and where they were posted—"

Lin Po put on his gloves and drew the letters into the light. These too were roughly brushed in what might be a student's hand. And each bore on the reverse side faint smudges of color, this time blue and green. "I'll need a list of all people connected with this project. All construction people, all those from this office as well."

Sim looked at the project manager, who looked at Lin with round, innocent eyes. "Every person connected—umm, that will take some time, you know."

Lin Po did not blink. "With addresses and I.D. numbers, please. Any-

one connected with the building from the very beginning. When do you think that could be ready?" He looked closely at the fingers of his gloves, then removed them, folding them with care.

Again Sim looked to the manager. "Three, maybe four weeks. There are many records to search—"

"It will require only two days to obtain a court order to close the work as a hazard to the public safety." Lin smiled. "Meanwhile I can close it on my own authority at any time. Do you think you could have the list by this time tomorrow?"

The face of the works manager darkened. "You speak of three hundred, four hundred names?"

"We speak of a madman who will kill without warning. What is the cost of your list measured in the lives of our citizens?"

Sim showed his teeth. "Let's compromise. We will find those who might have a reason to hold a grudge against the department." He glanced again at the manager. "We will put as many people to work on this as necessary so we may have a partial list by tomorrow morning at nine. We will have the rest in another twenty-four hours." The works manager rubbed his knuckles but said nothing.

"Many thanks." Lin Po stood. "Now I would like to see your file of the deeds for the property. It seems a shrine once stood on the site."

"Certainly, deputy inspector. Miss Wang will get you anything of that nature that is in our possession." He lifted his phone. "Miss Wang?"

One deed caught Lin's attention. It was in the name of the family Eng and was recorded soon after the 1911 revolution. The family had indeed purchased a corner of the lot from the revolutionary government for the purpose of erecting a shrine. Unfortunately in 1960, during the Cultural Revolution, the shrine had been destroyed.

Just a year ago the property was officially conveyed to the government by the People's Court for the reason of abandonment, and no record existed of expense for a priest to make peace with the spirit world. Miss Wang made copies of the entire file, which she tied in a plastic bag against the rain.

He received directions to the Court and Hall of Records, buying a bowl of rice on the way. At the Hall he was taken to the basement, to a short bald man who seemed always to smile as though he knew something, some great secret he could not divulge to such as Lin Po.

"Ah, the Engs. A highly respected clan. Many scholars in that family, and regrettably many died in the Cultural Revolution. But you are interested in the revolution of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen and that dog Chiang Kai-shek. Year of the revolution . . . here we are. Yes. Before the Manchus were overthrown, there were many executions of university students, teachers, publishers, in the name of the boy emperor. All is recorded here, Comrade Lin."

And there it was. Eng, father and son, with eleven other agitators, were put to death at the public gibbet for "crimes against the Empire."

Lin Po asked, "Were the bodies given over to their families?"

The man smiled more brightly. "Oh no. It was thought to be more—effective to deny such persons a proper tomb. They were buried near the gibbet in quicklime and the site paved over so the noise of traffic would forever disturb their sleep."

"And where would the Engs be found today?"

He pulled a knitted cap over his bald head against the chill of the basement. "All over China, I suspect. There is a very large clan in Hong Kong, I am told. But here—not so many now. Perhaps the Bureau of Census, third floor?"

It occurred to Lin that the name Eng also means "fish." A coincidence, of course. Dreams are but a wiping clean of the memory, a dumping of useless data from temporary storage. Just a coincidence that he should dream of a talking fish or two.

There was no computer yet in this office of the Bureau of Census. Any compilation would have to be made by hand, which would require several days. Lin took a chance.

"Please give me only the names of those sons of Eng who are not scholars or teachers. I can wait for the rest."

Of these the clerk could find only three. She wrote their names and addresses in neat classic characters, using a felt pen she had carefully shaped to a wedge point.

Consulting his map, Lin Po called on these three, but he found none of the men at home. He left word for each of them and hurried to his mother's house, where she was busy preparing a special meal.

"Since your honorable father died, I have made good friends with some older ladies." She poured tea in his cup. "They've taught me the western game of contract bridge, and it is my turn to be the hostess tonight."

"That should appeal to your mathematical mind, Mother. Bridge is, of course, a matter of probabilities. Much more healthy for you than that bunch of would-be magicians and fortunetellers who played mah-jongg."

"Shh!" she hissed. "They are even now at the door!"

But superstition was not absent from the cardtable. After an excellent meal, while his mother set the kitchen to rights, the other three ladies amused themselves with "spirit writing." A tray was covered with sifted sand. The "pen" was a T-shaped wand of plastic. One woman balanced each arm of the T on the tips of her index fingers. The leg of the T ended in a hooked point that rested in the sand.

Soon the wand began to jitter across the sand, leaving its marks for the three to discuss as though they were actual writing.

His mother approached, removing her apron. "Would you like to try, my son? Just for fun."

"I have no magic in me. But here's a real game for those who do have a mind for the spirit world." He took the clerk's paper from his briefcase and laid it on the table, blank side up. "On this paper are three names. One of these may be the name of a murderer, but which one?"

From the back side they could see that there were three columns of characters. "Oh my!" exclaimed the eldest lady. "This is exciting, isn't it? How shall we begin?"

Another said, "Can't we use the wand? Scatter sand on the back of the paper, and ask the spirits to find the evil one."

It was quickly prepared. Sand was sifted onto the paper and the wand put to work. For the first lady no clear answer was discovered.

"Let's make it simpler," said Po. "Just ask for a yes or a no. Spirits, is this the name of a murderer?"

The plastic point made a scrawl.

"Is this one a murderer?" The point skittered more violently.

"Is this, then, the one?" Another scrawl.

His mother exclaimed, "Oh, Mrs. Kung, it's so clear!" But Lin Po saw only the squiggles of an elderly hand.

Mrs. Kung passed the wand to another, and the sand was smoothed. The same question was asked, and confusion! A different answer was obtained.

Lin Po took the tray and turned it, again and again. "Try once more, please." He offered his mother the wand.

An even different answer resulted. There was no need for statistics. No matter how Lin turned the tray, and even with the woman blindfolded, no one column of characters stood out.

"Ask a different question, my son."

"Very well. Who will help me find the murderer?"

This time the wand scratched out the ideogram for a fish. A fine looking fish, and it was Lin Po's own hands that drew the symbol.

The bridge game was still going on when he went to bed. It seemed to be as much a commentary on the rearing of grandchildren as it was a game of cards.

Only one of the three Engs worked anywhere near the construction site. This was a window washer, one Eng Cho, who spent his days swinging from a platform let down over the edges of roofs. Lin Po dressed himself as a postal worker and followed Eng Cho and his buckets homeward.

But Eng Cho did not climb the stair to his apartment. Instead, he turned away and entered a tavern. Lin Po followed, and soon the two sat at the same table, drinking beer. By chance a barber mentioned the accident, and Lin Po grasped his cue.

"The family Eng has also suffered tragedy at that site, is it not true, Comrade Eng?"

Eng Cho stared at Lin Po but said nothing. A fire of hatred and distrust smoldered behind his eyes.

Lin Po took a brown envelope from his mail pouch. "Would you look at these letters, and tell me what you think, Comrade Eng?"

Sweat stood up in drops on Eng Cho's bald head. "I am a poor washer of windows. I know nothing of calligraphy and find trouble enough in signing my name."

"I think you can read better than you would have me believe. Look again. The writing is not the hand of a scholar but was obviously written by a more humble sort."

Eng Cho stared at the three copies. "Not so. A student cannot use the brush like a master, but a master can easily imitate a clumsy student." He drained his mug.

"You are familiar with steel scaffolding?" asked Lin Po. "The keeper pins were missing from all eight of the scaffold's first tier of pipes, a strange coincidence."

"So?" Eng Cho gained a little courage, perhaps from the beer. "I know that such scaffolds will not fall, even with the pins missing. The pins are an extra safety measure in case the scaffold should be knocked about or shaken by an earthquake. You are a policeman, not a high-iron worker, or you would know such things."

Lin Po considered Eng's words. "If you wanted to make such a scaffold fall, how would you do it?"

"Not possible," said Eng. "You would have to push it over with a truck."

That night before retiring Lin Po wrote a report for the detective in charge of the investigation, the dour Chiang. The next day Chiang found Lin Po in the police laboratory, seated at a microscope examining the three anonymous letters.

Chiang scowled. "Chief Inspector Koon has ordered me to bring your three suspects in for questioning. You may be present if you wish."

"Thank you, deputy inspector, but I have a few things to follow up." Lin Po carefully caused a single drop of water to fall on the paper. Instantly the red smudge dissolved.

Chiang turned to leave. "Curious, isn't it? Three suspects and a victim, all with the same family name."

"The survivor is named Eng?" Lin Po felt stupid for not having asked the names of those dead and injured.

"Indeed, and from the same family of scholars who built the shrine that was torn down to make room for the bank. Oh, I should have mentioned that doctors think the survivor is now able to answer our questions. I plan to see him as soon as I have done with these other poor fish."

"That is curious indeed," said Lin Po. "Is the injured Eng a laborer?"

"He is a young engineer," said Chiang, "not long out of school, but his family is humble enough. I think all four Eng's might have the same grandfather."

Chiang left, and Lin Po returned to his microscope. At 20X magnification, other bits of color were revealed, each adhering to the back sides of the three letters. The paper used was from three different sources; the ink was the black ink cake used by millions of calligraphers throughout Asia. Only the faint smudges of color were common to all three.

He took from his pocket his pair of cheap white gloves and carefully brought the microscope to bear on the fingers. The same flakes of color were revealed, trapped by fibers in the gloves. In only one place could Lin Po have picked up such a collection of pigments.

He slid the gloves into a plastic bag, which he labeled and placed in the file. Soon he was standing on the pedals of his bicycle, speeding between groaning trucks and honking buses and countless bicycles, on his way to the hospital.

The Intensive Care section was a ward, much like any other but equipped to care for those with special needs. A police officer stood at attention at the foot of the bed where Eng Tou lay. Lin Po asked her if Eng had had any visitors since he was admitted.

"Only the one," she said, "his sister, who even now helps the nurse change dressings." It was common practice for relatives to assume the minor tasks of nursing care, such as feeding or washing those who could not do so for themselves. "But I was advised to expect persons from his office to arrive today for the usual courtesies."

Eng Tou lay with a leg raised and in traction. Both his arms were in casts, and the nurse was winding a new bandage around his head. Tubes entered his nose, and another snaked from beneath the gray sheet to a pouch half full of urine. His eyes peered from between purplish bruises, and his voice was faint and rasping.

The man's sister was afraid of the police, like so many Chinese, and kept her eyes from Lin Po's face. "I will come back when you are finished, deputy inspector," she murmured.

"Please sit," ordered Lin Po. "I will have questions for you before I leave." She sat, with her hands in her lap and her head lowered, staring at her shoes. Lin Po too looked at her shoes, and thought they might cost as much as a new bicycle.

"He was very fortunate," said the nurse, "to fall four stories and live. He clung to the scaffolding on the way down, and it partially broke his fall. But his limbs will heal, and his scalp is cut without serious head trauma."

Lin Po asked outright, "Citizen Eng, have you any reason to believe that some person might wish you dead?"

His sister made a noise in her throat, and Eng's eyes blinked. "No," he said.

"Tell me what happened that night and why you were working after nightfall and in the freezing rain."

Slowly his words emerged from the crisp white bandages. "A fault was discovered in the hoist motor. The chief architect ordered it replaced so that work might continue on schedule in the morning. As the engineering supervisor, I was ordered to test the hoist before I left the job site.

"We had just brought up the spare motor and let it rest on the scaffold when my feet were knocked from under me. I was thrown to the edge of the catwalk, where I clung to something with my hands and legs and watched the ground rise up to meet me. More I do not remember."

"Your feet were knocked from under you?" Lin Po leaned closer. "Do you mean that some impact caused the fall?"

"Something struck the scaffold, and it whipped like a sapling, first one way, then the other, until it buckled and down we came, like a felled tree."

From the hallway came the sound of voices and many feet. Lin Po turned to speak to Eng's sister, but she was gone. He gave instructions to the policewoman and left after greeting Sim and his entourage.

The home of the chief architect was near the crest of a hill, with a view of the river, the sunset, and, far to the north, the Great Wall. A modest house it appeared from the street, but like so many traditional homes of the well-to-do, its luxuries were visible only to the family and their guests, from the inside.

Lin Po stood his bicycle on its kickstand and rang the antique bronze bell. A small stooped woman answered. "I am here to speak with the wife of Sim the chief architect."

The woman's eyes grew larger. "Not here! Not here!"

He produced a warrant and waved the official-looking paper beneath her nose. "Look again, Grandmother. Perhaps you are mistaken. Or shall I summon more officers and search the house?"

"You wait, please?" She shut the door and slid home the bolt. A few seconds passed, and she reappeared, to lead him down a dark hallway that smelled of sandalwood and incense. They passed through the length of the house to the walled garden behind, a small but exquisite space filled with evergreens, a fountain glazed with ice, and bronze sculptures signed by Sim himself.

He was surprised to see the lady of the house follow, pushing his bicycle, which she leaned against the moon gate. She murmured a few words to the amah, who left them alone.

She introduced herself as Rose. "How did you guess?" she asked in a voice low as a whisper. Only then did Lin Po recognize the woman who had called herself Eng's sister.

"I didn't, although I should have when I saw your shoes. They were expensive Italian shoes, for sale possibly in Hong Kong, and not the shoes I would expect to see on a woman from an humble family. Please sit."

The stone benches were cold, and Lin Po's pants were only cotton. "Tell me about young Engineer Eng."

She twisted a square of lace between her fingers. "Eng and I met in college. We loved each other very much, but I was from a family that would never approve of our marriage. Instead, my parents arranged for me to marry a wealthy and influential architect, an older man.

"Two years passed, and I did not know Eng Tou's address or what had happened to him. Sim kept me a prisoner in this house, a toy on a shelf. Then one day Eng's supervisor sent him to carry some papers to Sim, for some urgent project that made him work at home, even on a holiday. I chanced to answer the door, and our love blossomed anew over the back wall. Like two wild birds we were, finding brief moments of happiness."

Lin Po thought for a moment, I have no proof, only suspicion, that Sim is the guilty one. But if he would kill two bystanders to get at Eng, he will surely try again. And his quarry is never more vulnerable than when he lies in hospital, with one leg in the air.

He leaned forward. "Will you help me get the proof I need?"

Minutes later Lin Po left by the moon gate and the alley used by tradesmen.

That same night Lin Po lay in a hospital bed, his face obscured by a large, square bandage. Another officer lay in a bed just inside the door of the ward. Deputy Chiang sat in a chair, a snore bubbling from his nose. The ward's lights were dimmed, the nurses at their station engrossed in the tedious paperwork of their profession.

A shadow flashed across the light from the hallway. Lin Po took two breaths before a tall figure dressed all in white entered the ward. In another three breaths the tall one stood between Lin Po and the victim in the next bed.

A muffled cry and the tall one had slipped a plastic bag over the bandaged head. He and his victim began a desperate but silent struggle.

Lin Po swung his legs sharply, striking the tall one behind the knees, making him fall to the floor. Lin Po was on him at once and found he was no match for the much stronger and larger man. Chiang entered the battle by striking the man with his chair, and soon the assassin was in handcuffs and leg irons.

"Get the bag off her head!" he shouted, for Rose had panicked under the plastic and could not, with bandaged fingers, pull it from her nose.

Once again at his mother's apartment Lin Po sat while she fed him a

breakfast sufficient for three men. "How did you come to suspect Sim?" she asked.

"At first I thought only of someone from his offices because of the traces of watercolors on the back of each threatening letter. Everyone there, including the director, has a workbench spattered with the colors used in his making of drawings." He ate another bite. "The letters by themselves prove nothing except that the crime was planned well in advance."

His chopsticks reached for a steaming hot dumpling. "Later I thought if the fall was a plot to kill a person that person had to be on the scaffold at a certain time. To make the accident happen, the murderer needed to smash into the scaffold with a truck. And to cover his tracks he had to remove the truck and the sabotaged scaffold before anyone could study the evidence.

"The only person at the scene with the authority to get these things done was Sim. Which led me to ask what could cause an intelligent man like Sim to throw three people to their deaths just to kill one of them? The French, of course, have a proverb for it: 'Look for the woman.' And sure enough, office gossip led me to the answer."

His mother scooped warmed-over rice. "Where was this Eng while Rose took his place in the hospital?"

"In a bed at the far end of the ward. What delicious dumplings! You must have worked all night to feed me."

"You deserve something special," his mother said. "But how did you know Sim would strike last night?"

He had to swallow before he could answer. "I let it slip that today Eng would be flown to Beijing and the orthopedic hospital there for surgery. A lie, but Sim felt he had only one chance to complete his revenge. And he nearly did, for if he had killed Rose—"

She reached out and touched her son's hand. "And the two lovers? I trust they will find happiness at last."

"I doubt that." Lin Po poured tea for his mother, then for himself. "Rose feels she must stay by Sim's side and see the thing through to the end. It is a wife's duty, she said, a matter of honor. Unless Sim receives the death penalty, and with his powerful family, that is not to be expected, she will dress like a widow until—" He waved the chopsticks.

"Dragon's blood! I told you so," said the little round woman. "No good can ever come from disturbing a dragon. Bad fung shui!"

THE DANGER OF BEING FRANK

John H. Dirckx

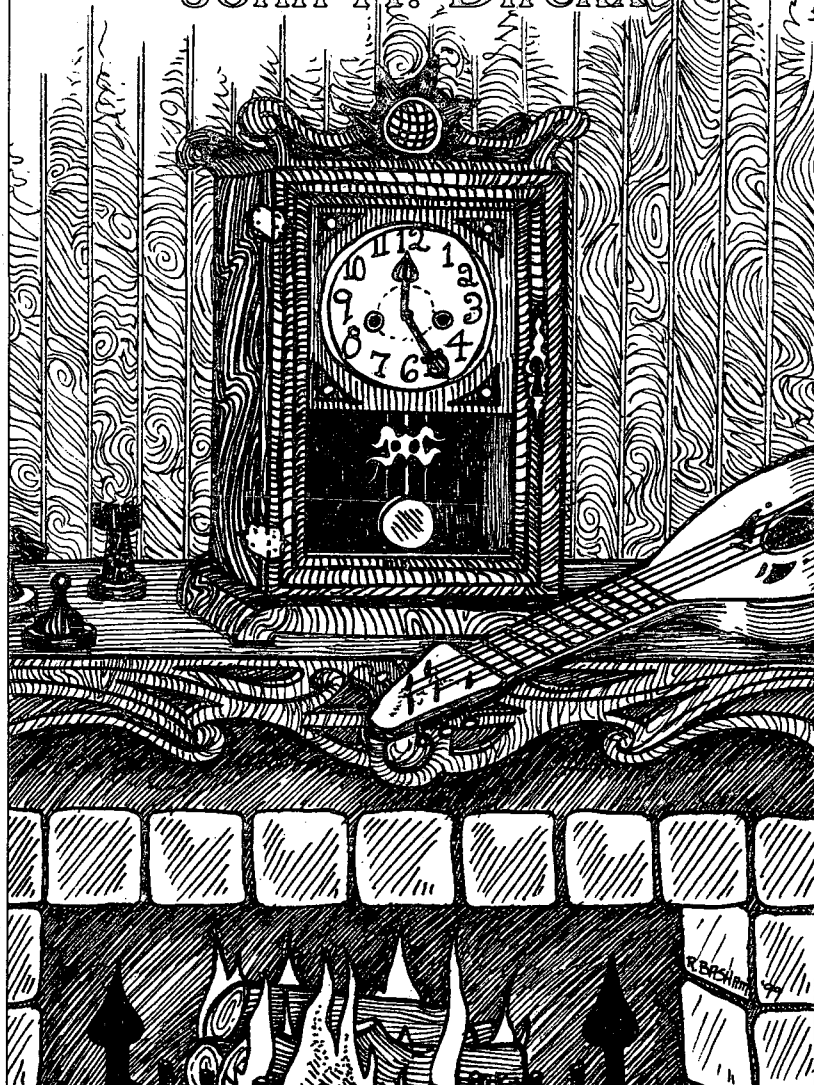


Illustration by Ray Basham

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The chiming clock in the parlor struck five, setting up faint sympathetic vibrations in the dusty mandolin that lay next to it on the mantel. Mrs. Helm felt that the mandolin lent a note of refinement and culture to the decor of her boardinghouse on Ninth Avenue. even though, over the years, none of her many tenants had been able to play it.

The parlor looked like something out of a Currier & Ives print entitled *Home and Hearth* or *Domestic Tranquillity*, and the rest of the house was pretty much of a piece with the parlor. Hardly a likely setting, one would have thought, for coldblooded murder.

Boyd Bland lounged in his favorite chair in the corner, watching the traffic through the dingy lace curtains and dingier windows and savoring the smell of dinner cooking. The door from the side porch opened, and Frank Strode came in humming, the evening paper under his arm. He took a seat opposite Bland and busied himself with his paper, from time to time reading a headline aloud.

Mrs. Helm's head appeared suddenly and briefly in the doorway. "I'm putting it on the table, gentlemen," she said. Bland and Strode filed into the dining room, where Hans Drebbel was already seated at the table. Hugh Gardner was just coming in from the back hall.

Mrs. Helm brought the platter of roast beef in from the kitchen and carved and dispensed it with ceremony. "You eat that before you get any more, Mr. Bland. Your turn is coming, Mr. Drebbel." If her man-

ner fell short of a mother's tenderness, it wasn't quite as uncompromising as a major league umpire's.

She ate with the boarders, dividing her attention between her plate and their needs. Experience had taught her that if she left them to serve one another, some petty conflict would inevitably arise. Middle-aged bachelors were a lot like little boys; wherever their lives rubbed together, sparks were apt to fly.

As stomachs began to fill, conversation broke out in the dining room. Frank Strode yawned, said he was sleepy, and reached for the coffeepot.

"Didn't sleep very well myself last night," sighed Hugh Gardner with a faintly theatrical air. "Accursed television blaring until all hours." He stared pointedly at Strode.

Strode stared back. He was a wiry restless man to whose face a bushy mustache lent an air of pugnacity. "Bogart festival last night," he explained matter-of-factly.

"I won't comment on your taste," grumbled Gardner. "But the racket was entirely unreasonable. And unseasonable." He sat back in his chair as pleased with his impromptu rhyme as if he'd just invented some particularly ingenious improvement on the wheel.

"Well, cheer up," said Strode. "I'm thinking of buying a car one of these days, and if you're lucky, I'll move uptown."

Gardner eyed him with a flicker of derision. "Pretty free with the cash all of a sudden, aren't you?"

"When you've got it, you spend it."

John T. Drebbel—Hans to his friends—cleared his throat portentously and cracked a knuckle or



two before joining the conversation. "If the cash is flowing in as freely as that, Strode, you may have to open a bank account after all." He nodded after he spoke, a habit of his, as if to underscore the aptness and correctness of his remarks. A pair of glasses with thick round lenses accentuated the froggish tendencies of his features.

"Not on your life," said Strode. "My folks lost all they had back in the Depression by trusting banks."

"We've heard that story a few times before," Gardner reminded him. "And how, by the time you came along, they couldn't afford to send you to school, and you were making your living selling chickens when you were nine."

"Shoes. When I was thirteen. I'm not ashamed of that. I wouldn't trade my work record with anybody at this table."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just what I said. I never had a disciplinary suspension in my life. Never even had a bad performance evaluation. And never any trouble with the police, either. More than I can say for some folks. And it's all a matter of record." He laid particular emphasis on the last word.

"But hardly public record," asserted Drebbel, with something tentative and even interrogative in his tone.

Boyd Bland let his mashed potatoes get cold while following this exchange of thinly veiled hostilities. He seldom had much to say at the table, but he didn't miss a word of what the others said.

"Records can get public in a hurry when there's a reorganization, or

a reduction in force," said Strode. "The dead wood goes first."

"Who're you calling dead wood?" countered Gardner, his voice raised now in anger. "Getting pretty big for your britches, aren't you?"

At this point Mrs. Helm saw fit to intervene. "Don't let's argue at the table, gentlemen," she chided in a sharp tone that effectively put an end to the conversation. "It's bad for your digestion, if you know what I mean."

All of Mrs. Helm's current boarders worked for the same company, a manufacturer of medium-priced traditional furniture whose factory was situated five minutes' walk from the house. Since each of them worked in a different department, they didn't ordinarily talk shop at the table.

That had changed since Frank Strode's recent advancement, abrupt and unforeseen, to the position of personnel director. Over the years Strode had struggled steadily upward despite the lack of a formal education and a regrettable habit of often speaking out of turn and without due reflection.

When the sudden death of a supervisor had led to his promotion, the increase in salary, prestige, and power had gone to his head. Access to a roomful of confidential records gave him the whip hand over people with more education and skill than he, to whom he had been yielding and deferring for years. With Gardner and Drebbel, who had long ago fallen into the habit of baiting and bullying him, he had lately become condescending, demanding, and sarcastic.



After the six o'clock news when Gardner and Drebbel sat down to their nightly chess game the hostilities resumed. Strode turned on his favorite quiz program and pushed the volume up a couple of notches.

The chess players had no intention of standing for this distraction. "They make headphones for the benefit of the deaf," shouted Gardner, cupping his hands around his mouth.

"And they show the questions on the screen," added Drebbel with savage sarcasm, "for the benefit of those who can read."

Strode turned from his program, his controlled manner giving no indication of the rage that churned within him. "And I guess people who can't read push little statues around on a board, is that it, Hans?"

"Impudence is the first recourse of stunted minds," announced Gardner, who had once been a high school teacher.

"You know what you can do with your big words," snapped Strode, his voice rising suddenly to such unaccustomed loudness that Mrs. Helm came in from the kitchen to see what was the matter. She stood in the dining room doorway clutching a dish towel and regarding Strode with brows knitted in disapproval.

But Strode had gone too far to stop now.

"If you two don't get off my back," he went on darkly with an ominous tremor in his voice, "you're going to wish you'd never laid eyes on me. I've got enough dirt on both of you to get you fired tomorrow morning.

You might even be hearing from the police."

He switched off the television with a violent snap of the wrist. He got up and went to the closet for his hat. "I need some air. You coming, Bland?"

"It walks by night," droned Gardner in sepulchral tones, but there was cold sweat on his forehead.

Mrs. Helm bustled into the parlor. "Here, Mr. Strode, Mr. Bland, don't you think of going out there tonight. It's going to storm any minute. They just said so on the weather. Plus my operation hurts."

"We'll just go as far as the tracks into the plant," said Strode.

Without further ado he and Bland trudged out of the house and started along the dark reaches of Ninth Avenue. The wind muttered in the leafless trees and squawked around the old houses. For a time they walked in silence, but at length Strode's wrath boiled over into speech.

"Sharks and vultures. That's all there is out there. It's all a question of survival of the fittest." Bland vaguely remembered having heard his friend use this odd phrase before. Strode ranted on in the same vein, vowing revenge on his enemies but assuring Bland that he himself had nothing to fear in the coming purge, and perhaps something to gain. Bland tagged along wordlessly at his side, his doglike loyalty spiced with a dash of fear.

"Nothing out there but sharks and vultures. You forget that and you're a lost man." About the time the walkers reached the railroad crossing, the threatened storm



broke, with the result that they returned home drenched, shivering, and out of breath.

Frank Strode's fatal decline dated from that night. For a day or two he thought it was only a cold, and maybe it was at first, but then matters grew graver. He took to his bed and stayed there. No longer was Hugh Gardner's sleep disturbed by dusk-to-dawn film festivals on television. No longer did Hans Drebbel fumble at chess while listening with half an ear to one of Strode's quiz programs.

Mrs. Helm turned nurse as was her custom in such circumstances, and Boyd Bland took to sitting at Strode's bedside for hours in the evening. The sick man would touch nothing but soup and juice.

A week passed, during which he seemed to go steadily downhill.

One evening when the dinner dishes were done, Boyd Bland tapped at the half-open door to Mrs. Helm's private domain, which opened off the kitchen. In the parlor the chess players hunched in sober and contemplative silence over their board.

Mrs. Helm was taking advantage of a spell of leisure to black her shoes while watching a sitcom on her own television set.

"Is he awake?" she asked Bland.

"Yes, but he says he doesn't want anything to eat. Says nothing tastes right to him." Bland hovered indecisively in the doorway, the picture of a man chronically overwhelmed by the choices that life presents. "He seems awful weak."

"You just take him some broth. I've got it on simmer." She put aside

the bottle of blacking and padded to the stove in her stocking feet. "That's pretty full now, Mr. Bland. Don't you spill it." She watched him totter up the back stairs before returning to her sanctum.

Next morning Mrs. Helm was measuring the breakfast coffee into the twenty-five-cup urn (its contents would serve for lunch and dinner as well) when Hugh Gardner came into the kitchen looking pale and disheveled. "Well," he announced with forced nonchalance, "old Strode won't be drinking any more coffee. He's dead."

Mrs. Helm dropped the scoop into the coffee can and began wringing her hands. "Oh, are you sure, Mr. Gardner? Are you sure?"

"Yes, quite sure."

"Oh, the poor dear soul! Mr. Schell! I have to call Mr. Schell." She bustled distractedly into her room to find the phone directory.

In the course of the morning Mr. Schell of Boone and Schell, Funeral Directors, called with an assistant, conferred briefly with Mrs. Helm, and removed the late Frank Strode from the premises.

In the course of the afternoon a pudgy man with dark curly hair and gold-rimmed glasses called and handed Mrs. Helm his card.

"'Coroner's office,'" she read aloud in a vaguely inquiring tone. "'Nicholas Stamaty.' That's foreign, isn't it?"

"According to my grandfather," said Stamaty with a good-humored expression that accentuated the premature crow's feet at the corners of his eyes, "it's a Hungarian



spelling of a Czech version of a Greek name."

"Isn't that interesting! Where was your grandfather born?"

"Right outside Cleveland."

She may have thought that was interesting, too, but she didn't mention it. "Is anything wrong? About Mr. Strode?"

"Mr. Schell at the funeral parlor reported the death to us, and we're following it up as a matter of routine. Did you think anything was wrong?"

"No, but I'm just saying—nobody came to see me after Mr. Ambrose died. Another one of my boarders. That was two or three years ago."

"Probably just an oversight. How long had Mr. Strode been living here?"

"About two years."

"Was he related to you?"

"No, sir. What he told me is, he was born in Wisconsin—" she pronounced it "West Consin" "—but he didn't have no living relations there nor here, neither one."

"How long was he sick?"

"Only just a few days. He caught a terrible cold from walking in the rain about a week ago."

"Did he have a doctor?"

"No, he didn't. He didn't trust doctors nor lawyers. Nor banks."

"When did you last see Mr. Strode alive?"

Her bushy brows sloped down to a point above her nose as she concentrated on her reply. "It must have been about noon yesterday. I nursed him as good as I could, but I don't go up and down them stair-steps no more than what I have to. Mostly Mr. Bland took his trays up

to him. Or Mr. Drebbel, once or twice."

"I'd like to talk to them if they're around."

"They're at work. All my boarders works over to Gromacki's—the furniture factory. They'll be in for dinner about five."

"Who found Mr. Strode dead this morning?"

"That was Mr. Gardner. He stayed home today, if you want to talk to him. He's not feeling very well himself."

She went to the foot of the front stairs and called up to advise Gardner that he was about to have a visitor. "You just go on up," she directed Stamaty. "It's the room right at the top of the stairs."

Stamaty found Gardner reading at a small desk on which stood an old fashioned brass lamp with a penholder built into the base. Between the crowded bookshelves and the heavy, battered bedroom suite there was little room to spare anywhere.

"Mr. Gardner? Coroner's office. I understand you found Mr. Strode dead this morning."

"That's correct, sir." Gardner stood up and bowed with an exaggerated and palpably phony cordiality. "Here, please take the chair. I'll sit on the bed."

"Thanks, but I don't need to sit down." For the rest of the interview they both stood. "What time was it when you found Mr. Strode dead?"

"A couple of minutes before seven. I looked in on him while I was getting dressed because he'd been sick of late."

"Did you notice anything unusual in the room?"

"No. Just that Strode was dead. Must have been dead for hours."

"You touched him, then?"

"Why yes."

Gardner was suddenly wary, but instead of abandoning his pompous, melodramatic manner, he laid it on thicker.

"When I saw that Strode had—dropped out of the game, so to speak, I closed his eyes and covered his face. Last sad office of a friend type of thing."

"Covered his face with what, sir?"

Gardner shrugged. "The covers on the bed. An old green quilt. He used to wrap up in it like an Arab when the house was cold at night."

"Mind showing me which is Mr. Strode's room?"

Gardner led him to a bedroom smaller than his own, wedged between the bathroom and the back stairs.

"Thanks," said Stamaty in a tone of polite dismissal. "I won't bother you any more. I understand you're a little under the weather today."

"Oh, it's nothing much. Strode pegging off like that just sort of threw my nerves out of gear. I called in sick and went back to bed. Slept past noon."

Having gotten rid of Gardner, Stamaty conducted a thorough search of Frank Strode's room. The undertaker had left the covers pulled down to the foot of the bed—a cotton sheet, a khaki blanket that was unmistakably army surplus, and a worn green quilt. He subjected the quilt to intense scrutiny, but being a stickler for protocol, he forbore to handle it, much less remove a sample of the fabric.

Under the bed Stamaty found only mounds of dust and cobwebs and a fragment broken from the crystal of a good-sized clock, probably an alarm clock. Of the clock itself there was no sign. The drawers of the stained old dresser were crammed with miscellaneous personal effects—all except the shallow top one, the only drawer that had a lock. Stamaty found it unlocked and practically empty.

On the top of the dresser lay a matching wallet and keyfold, both ancient. He made a note of Strode's Social Security number and a few other data from the wallet, which contained seven one-dollar bills.

He found Mrs. Helm in the kitchen peeling potatoes and carrots.

"Sorry to have inconvenienced you, ma'am," he said. "I'll be going now, but somebody may be back in touch with you later. Do you expect to be here all afternoon and evening?"

"Why yes, I'll be here. I don't never go out after dark, and this time of year it's dark by the time dinner's over."

After letting himself out of the house, Stamaty drove as quickly as the afternoon traffic would permit to a pay phone in front of a laundromat. From there he called police headquarters and asked to speak with the senior watch lieutenant.

Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn was at his desk at headquarters bringing his memoirs up to the hour and wishing he'd had something other than coffee on his afternoon break when Lieutenant



Savage appeared in the doorway. "You want to pick up line two, Cy? Stamaty thinks he's got a homicide over on Ninth Avenue."

Less than twenty minutes later Auburn parked his car next to Stamaty's van at the laundromat and joined him in the van.

"You alone?" asked Stamaty.

Auburn spread his hands. "Totally solitary."

"But you've got a warrant?"

"Not this trip."

Stamaty squirmed in his seat and shook his head. "You guys operate funny. I told you—"

"The lieutenant wants me to check it out first. If there's probable cause, he'll send Kestrel with a search warrant."

"If there's probable cause? Didn't you tell him about the green fibers and the toothmarks?"

"I told him. What are those women looking at?"

"Us. It's the sign on the door. People always think I've got a body in the back. Listen, Cy, there's a raty old green quilt on Strode's bed. Warrant or not, you or Kestrel or somebody else from your lab better get your hands on it quick."

Mrs. Helm's boardinghouse was a tall, narrow, white frame building with peeling paint and rusted spouting, nearly indistinguishable from its neighbors. Auburn's ring at the door was answered by a stout woman in a voluminous apron.

Her cheeks blazed with rouge, and her sturdy square-toed shoes looked as if they had been polished with a tar brush. He showed identification.

"I just had another person here,"

she said, "a white man, not no more than an hour ago, asking me all kinds of questions."

Auburn nodded patiently. "Mr. Stamaty works for the coroner. I'm from the police department."

The parlor was full of her perfume—an old woman's perfume, heavy and sweet, like overripe fruit. "I never knew such a fuss to be made about somebody dying in their bed."

Auburn took note of his surroundings—the chessboard, the mandolin, the potted ferns, the matched porcelain partridges with the chipped sides turned towards the wall. For some women the battle against dust is a consuming passion. Evidently Mrs. Helm wasn't one of these.

"Mr. Stamaty's department had one or two reasons for thinking Mr. Strode's death might not have been natural."

Her heavy eyebrows bunched up like storm clouds. "What do you mean? What kind of reasons?"

"The coroner's preliminary investigation suggested that he died of suffocation."

"You mean something cut off his air, like?"

"Something or somebody."

Her frown deepened. "But the poor soul died in his bed. How could he have suffocated?"

"It's only a preliminary impression. There may be nothing in it, but we have to follow up on it for the coroner."

"Well, what do you want?"

"I'd like to ask you a few questions and look around the house." He slipped a three by five file card from his pocket and made a nota-

tion in an upper corner. "If you don't mind."

They went over the details of Frank Strode's final illness and death. "I understand Mr. Strode has no known next of kin," said Auburn. "Who's in charge of his affairs?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, somebody will have to take responsibility for making funeral arrangements and settling his estate. Do you know if he had a lawyer?"

"I know full well he didn't. Mr. Strode didn't trust nobody. Wouldn't even put his money in the bank."

"Kept it all here in the house, did he?"

"I guess so. I really wouldn't know."

"Did he have any close friends in town?"

"Just the other gentlemen that lives here in the house. Which they get along together sometimes like a cageful of tigers."

"Any particular trouble between Mr. Strode and any of the others recently?"

"Only that he's been talking high and mighty the last couple of weeks since he got a promotion over to the factory. Plus his usual pickiness and feistiness."

"Have you or the tenants had any visitors at the house in the last two or three days?"

"No, sir. I'm pretty strict. No visitors after dinner, no liquor in the house, no bad language—"

They were interrupted by the entrance of a gaunt, elderly man in a tweed suit that had gone out of style three times and come back in twice. "This is Mr. Gardner," she told Auburn. "He's the one that

found Mr. Strode dead this morning. If you'll excuse me, I've got to get on with dinner."

Auburn identified himself. "Sit down, sir, and please make yourself comfortable," said Gardner with the flamboyant gestures and grandiloquent manner of a frustrated actor. His broad brow and steely eye promised intellectual power and strength of character, but a sensual mouth and an irresolute chin reneged on the deal. Auburn took particular note of his hands, which were chalk-white with tapering fingers—the idle hands of an aesthete.

"Surely Strode's death isn't really a police matter, is it?" asked Gardner. "I mean, the chap from the coroner's office said he was just making routine inquiries, and now . . ." He watched in evident dismay as Auburn entered his name on a file card.

"At this point it's not exactly routine any more," admitted Auburn. "All I can tell you is that the forensic examination of Mr. Strode's body turned up some questionable findings, and I've been assigned to take over the investigation from here on."

They reviewed the events of the morning. "Are you sure Mr. Strode was dead when you covered him up?"

"Good Lord, yes!" exclaimed Gardner. "I told the other investigator and I'm telling you, Strode was as dead as a frozen mackerel. What sort of questionable findings, if I may ask?"

"Did you hear anything unusual during the night?"

"No, but I sleep very soundly."



"Were you and Mr. Strode particularly good friends?"

Gardner looked into a remote corner of the parlor and cleared his throat. "Not particularly good, no. But of course we had practically nothing in common. I'm a literary type, if you will. Started out teaching high school English, but now I do all the technical writing and advertising copy for Gromacki's—the furniture factory, you know, up in the next block. In fact all of us here in the house work there.

"Strode was one of those poor devils that have had littleness thrust upon them, if you follow me. A good deal of native shrewdness, but lazy. Dropped out of high school because he thought it was smart to make cigarette money by working as a stock boy in a grocery warehouse while his friends were still bisecting triangles and analyzing *Paradise Lost*. Sort of slid into the gutter and stayed there. A miser and a confirmed bachelor."

"How did he get along with the other boarders?"

Gardner passed his hand over his forehead like a silent movie actor signaling discreet reflection. "Let me give you a clue, sir. We walk to work in all weathers, the lot of us. But only Frank and Boyd Bland walked together. Bland's a blue-collar worker at the factory, the sort of chap who never quite adjusts to life outside the womb." He leaned closer and dropped his voice to a stage whisper. "I suspect he may have been a drinker at one time. I understand he came from a good family but got himself into some kind of trouble early on in life—disinherit-

ed, I don't know. . . . But Strode was always friendly with Bland—I think because Bland was plainly his inferior. Drebbel and I incurred Strode's contempt because we were educated, cultivated, successful . . ."

Auburn had a little difficulty reconciling the notion of success with his present surroundings. "I think you said Mr. Drebbel also works at the factory?"

"Correct, sir. Hans is an engineer—still works full-time at seventy-two. Sort of a know-it-all. Devious, manipulative, but nothing very impressive in the brain department. He's been working on some kind of pneumatic stapling gun for seven or eight years and still hasn't got it right."

"And what about your landlady? How did she and Mr. Strode get along?"

"Mrs. Helm? Oh, she mothers us all in her rough-and-tumble way. Basically a decent soul even if her grammar does grate on the refined ear like a rusty hinge."

"Does she have any family of her own?"

"Not that I know of. She's been widowed for years." The mantel clock struck four. "Here's Bland already."

A squat little dumpling-faced man probably not much over fifty drifted aimlessly into the room and, discovering Auburn's presence, gazed at him with the timid, panicky manner of a cornered mouse. Gardner made introductions.

"Sit down, Mr. Bland," said Auburn. "I hear you and Mr. Strode were pretty good friends."

"Yes. I miss old Frank already."



Bland swallowed hard, and Auburn thought he was going to cry. His flabby, spade-shaped hands looked like the ineffectual flippers of some clumsy mud dwelling creature. "We looked out for each other, Frank and I. But he said he might be moving out pretty soon." Hugh Gardner made a surreptitious exit into the hall, and a moment later they heard him going up the back stairs.

"I understand you work at the furniture factory, too, Mr. Bland. What sort of work do you do there?"

"I'm in dunnage and pack-out. Frank was trying to get me a better job in receiving; now I guess I'm probably stuck where I am."

"How did Strode get along with the other two boarders—Gardner and Drebbel?"

Bland scrutinized the palm of his left hand as if he were looking for a splinter. "Not very well. They had a lot of arguments."

"What about?"

"Different things. Frank just got promoted at the factory. Personnel director. He said there was stuff in the records that made the other guys look bad. Said he might get them fired if they didn't get off his back."

Auburn made a mental note to get a look at those records as soon as possible. "What were they on his back about?"

"Different things. They used to gang up on him, make fun of him because he never went to college, things like that."

"I'm just going over a few details about Mr. Strode's death. Do you remember the last time you saw him alive?"

"Last night, late. I checked on him around eleven thirty to see if he needed anything before I went to bed."

"And was he all right?"

"Said he felt cold and weak. I pulled his quilt up around his shoulders."

"What kind of a quilt?"

"A green comforter. Frank used to wear it around the house like a bathrobe."

"Let's go upstairs and see if we can find it."

The second story of the house was just as blatantly unmodernized and grubby as the first. An indefinable smell, suggesting dirt and decay, seemed to rise from the mud-colored carpet and emanate from the papered walls. A dark, narrow hall ran straight from the front stairs to the back stairs with two bedrooms on each side and a bathroom sandwiched between those on the left. Frank Strode's room was at the rear, behind the bath.

Auburn noted the findings Stamaty had reported and retrieved the fragment of clock crystal from under the bed, observing that there was no dust on its upper surface. Bland said he was sure Strode had an alarm clock with a crystal like that, but he couldn't remember how recently he'd seen it on the nightstand.

There was no sign of a green quilt in the room.

"Well, I'm sure you've got other things to do," said Auburn. "I'll just look a little further on my own, thanks."

Although Boyd Bland almost certainly had nothing else to do, he

accepted his dismissal demurely and vanished down the back stairs.

The oblique position of the heavy steel bedstead seemed to accentuate the awkward smallness of the room. Originally it must have been a hospital bed, and several screw-clamp fittings remained attached to the frame. Auburn stood for a few moments in the middle of Frank Strode's room, trying to get a feel for the personality of its late occupant by surveying the things he'd treasured and used to adorn this bleak little chamber.

On a corner shelf stood a very old plaster Mickey Mouse figurine that might have been of some value as an antique if it hadn't been smashed to bits at some time or other and put together again with glue that had oozed out of the joints and turned canary yellow on hardening. An Art Deco ashtray on the nightstand, with most of the electroplating scorched off, contained about two packs' worth of cigarette butts. The reek of stale cigarette smoke hung in the air like a fog and permeated everything in the room. In a dresser drawer Auburn found stacks of baseball cards and a collection of miniature liquor bottles, all of them empty.

Something had happened in that room last night—something fatal to Frank Strode. And by no stretch of the imagination could it have been an accident.

He made a lightning search, more intent on thoroughness than on putting things back as he'd found them. Everything in the room was cheap, shabby, damaged, or worn out, and not a single article of

real worth was to be found. None of the keys in the keyfold fitted the lock of the empty dresser drawer.

It was about four thirty when Auburn widened the sphere of his search. Stepping softly, he had a quick look around Gardner's stuffy and book-cluttered room, hazarded a glance into the closet, and got out again. Across the hall in Boyd Bland's room everything was in hopeless disorder. Magazines, cardboard boxes, paper bags, empty soft drink cans, and articles of clothing were strewn everywhere as in the aftermath of a cyclone. Although a thorough search was obviously impracticable, Auburn satisfied himself that the green quilt wasn't there.

His next stop was the bathroom, where the plumbing was antiquated and the enormous medicine cabinet stuffed with the makings of a pharmaceutical museum. Auburn saw packages and brand names that he remembered from his childhood but hadn't seen since. An assortment of patent medicines and a cache of old prescription bottles filled three shelves. He started to investigate these but then resolutely shut the cabinet door and left the bathroom.

On his way to the back stairs he took a quick look into the last bedroom, which by default must have been Drebber's. Here the decor was spartan, the geometric order of things almost painful. A drawing board stood in the corner, and on a small table in front of the window were ranged tools, mechanical parts, and scraps of hardware. Auburn's hand was on the closet doorknob

when the tenant of the room walked in.

"Anything I can help you with?" asked Drebbel with a brittle pugnacity that Auburn would have sworn was nine-tenths bluff.

"Police officer, sir," said Auburn, hauling out his badge.

"I know who you are," said Drebbel. "Go ahead. No skeletons in there." A smile played fitfully over his rubbery cheeks. Auburn took note of the gold pen and pencil set in his shirt pocket, the blanched burn scar on his neck, the knobby, sinewy hands, the deformed left little finger.

"I'm just having a quick look over the house."

"So I heard. Something fishy about Strode's death?" The thick lenses of Drebbel's glasses magnified his eyes grotesquely, creating the illusion of exaggerated alertness, if not morbid curiosity.

"In a way, yes. Got a minute?"

"Certainly. Just wanted to take off my tie before dinner." He proceeded to do so, hanging it with elaborate care on a rack on the inside of the closet door and incidentally giving Auburn a clear view of the interior of the closet. "I'm John Drebbel, by the way."

Auburn had a file card in his hand. "Were you particularly close to Mr. Strode?"

"Oh no. Not at all. Mere acquaintances, you might say, even though he lived right across the hall. Surely his death isn't really a police case, is it?"

"Just routine for now. What kind of a man was Mr. Strode, would you say?"

Drebbel pursed his lips and sucked in his cheeks. "A very ordinary man. No education or culture to speak of. Low self-esteem. Passed himself off as a suffering hero." As he finished voicing each observation he emphasized it with a curt nod.

"Pretended to know secrets about people. Claimed he had a lot of money stashed away here somewhere."

"What about that? Did he have money here?"

"Possibly. Strode didn't have much use for me personally, and he certainly didn't confide in me about his financial affairs."

"Was there someone else in the house he was closer to?"

"Boyd Bland. They used to pal around together like a couple of lost souls. You've already talked to Bland, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"A sad case. The sort of chap of whom it might be said that a great future lies behind him. His family had money, I believe, and he's a lot brighter than he acts, but something went wrong somewhere. Drugs, drink, I don't know. It's his personality structure that's pathological. Passive-dependent. For him, life's a spectator sport. Of course, he's Mrs. Helm's pet—the son she never had."

"How did Mr. Strode and Mr. Gardner get along?"

Drebbel turned the full glare of his monstrous eyes on Auburn.

"This is getting to be a regular gossip session. Gardner's nothing but a windbag. Not very bright—a plodder. Prides himself on his cunning, but he's as transparent as



that window pane. I know what I'm talking about: I play chess with him every night. He didn't do anything to Strode, and neither did any of the rest of us. The only one in the household with enough backbone to kill anybody is Mrs. Helm. You should see that woman swat flies."

He meant it jocularly, and Auburn pursued it in the same vein. "Any reason why she'd want to kill Strode?"

"To the contrary. The dead don't pay rent. After old Ambrose died, it took her six months to get Bland in here because she won't have liquor in the house. No, the autopsy will show that Frank just pegged off with a bad case of the flu. We old geezers do that, you know."

The parlor clock struck five as they were going down the back stairs, which creaked worse than the front ones. They found the others just sitting down to eat in the stark, gloomy dining room. A low-hanging chandelier above the table shed a wan ivory glow over framed photographs of the Arch of Triumph and the Sphinx hanging on the wall above the buffet.

"I'm sorry to disturb you at mealtime," said Auburn, addressing them all, "but we need to do some further investigation yet this evening. I expect to have an evidence technician here within half an hour or so. I'll have to ask you all to stay in the house until we've finished."

If Stamaty's and then Auburn's own operations in the house that afternoon had stirred up a groundswell of uneasiness among the tenants, the last announcement nearly set off a panic. But he was deaf

to their protests and even forbade anyone to go upstairs until he returned.

He needed some fresh air, and besides, the smell of Mrs. Helm's beef stew was making him hungry. First he visited the dark alley behind the house and went through the trashcans with the help of a flashlight. In a brown paper bag with coffee grounds and eggshells he found a big old alarm clock, its crystal broken and missing a segment.

He went to his car and, less wary than Stamaty had been of putting sensitive material on the air, he radioed headquarters to request background checks on the surviving occupants of the house on Ninth Avenue, including Mrs. Helm. Then he reported briefly to Lieutenant Savage, expressing himself with sufficient vagueness and ambiguity to prevent electronic eavesdroppers from picking up anything substantial.

"I'm voting with the gentleman who has his office in the courthouse," he said. "The subject was helped on his way, and one of the focus group did the helping. Maybe all of them did and divided up the residuals. Anyway, we need to disassemble the premises, and we'd better request a document before—"

"It's lying right here on my desk. Get back over there and sit on them until Kestrel shows up."

"How come you've already got a warrant?" asked Auburn, abandoning the doubletalk.

"Update from the gentleman at the courthouse. Kestrel will tell you." Savage hung up.



On returning to Ninth Avenue, Auburn found Mrs. Helm and her boarders still in the dining room, sitting somberly over their coffee. The two candy bars and the bag of peanuts he'd nibbled in the car had taken away most of his hunger, but the smell of stew lingering in the air brought some of it back.

When he asked to talk privately with Mrs. Helm, she took him into her sanctum, a long narrow room off the kitchen that had probably been an enclosed porch in the original design of the house.

"There are a couple of other things I want to ask you, ma'am. What day is your trash pickup here?"

"Trash pickup? Friday. Which they'll have double their work this week after I clean out Mr. Strode's room."

"I'll ask you not to do any cleaning or throwing out just yet. We don't know whose property Mr. Strode's things are now, legally. There may be a relative somewhere, or he may have left a will. What arrangements were you planning to make with Mr. Schell for the funeral expenses?"

"Well, I just don't know. It was different when Mr. Ambrose died. I had power of attorney for him." She pondered a moment, her brows twitching convulsively. "What are you looking for up there, anyway?"

"Well, a couple of things actually. Mr. Stamaty and I both thought it was a little strange that the top drawer of Mr. Strode's bureau was unlocked and empty. Would you happen to know if he kept anything in there?"

"No," she said, studiously avoid-

ing his eye. "I don't mess with the gentlemen's personal things. But that drawer never had no key."

"Then there's this green quilt from Mr. Strode's room. A couple of the boarders remember seeing it on the bed lately, but now it seems to be missing. Do you know where it might be?"

"The undertakers must have wrapped him up in it when they took him away."

"They say they didn't. Besides, Mr. Stamaty saw it here earlier this afternoon."

The doorbell rang, but before she could get to the parlor, Gardner admitted Kestrel, the police evidence technician. Standing just inside the door with a camera case in one hand and a field investigation kit in the other, Kestrel gave signs of profound relief when Auburn appeared from the back of the house. They went upstairs to escape prying eyes and curious ears.

Auburn showed Kestrel the room where Strode had lived and died, and Kestrel handed Auburn the search warrant and a memo faxed from the coroner's office. While Auburn read by the light of the dim ceiling fixture, Kestrel stood in the doorway surveying the room with the eye of an artist. Austere in manner and sparing of speech, he was a perfectionist at his work, more comfortable with cameras and microscopes than with suspected felons or recalcitrant witnesses.

"Before you get too deeply involved in here," said Auburn, "I want to see what you think about this medicine cabinet."

A minute or two later he was



back downstairs, formally serving the search warrant on Mrs. Helm. He started his serious searching in the basement.

In spite of the sketchy lighting system, fetid drains, and a rank stench of mildew that assailed him like a wire brush up each nostril, he made a good job of it but found nothing. Mrs. Helm and her boarders were watching the news when he went up the back stairs and climbed a further flight beyond a door opposite the bathroom to reach the attic. Here the smell was dusty and mousy and the cobwebs lay so thick that they obviously hadn't been disturbed for months or years.

He rejoined Kestrel in the bathroom. "There's not much hope of lifting prints with all this dust," said Kestrel. "But somebody's been into this stuff lately."

Auburn examined the row of bottles ranged on the chipped and discolored washstand. There were three brands of patent medicine for swelling, all with the same active ingredient.

"Mean any thing to you?" he asked.

Kestrel grunted. "Not my field."

Auburn looked at his watch. "What time does Stamaty go home?"

"Depends. Sometimes he doesn't."

"I'm going to try to catch him at the office. Not from here, though. Keep an eye on the folks while I'm gone." Kestrel glared at him but said nothing.

Phoning from the laundromat, Auburn found Stamaty at home celebrating the birthday of one of his numerous children. "Nick, did you do a toxicology screen on Strode?"

"That's routine. Reports won't be back till Friday."

"Do they test for ammonium chloride?"

"I wouldn't think so. What's that—some kind of chemical fertilizer?"

"Pills for swelling. Over the counter. Ring any bells?"

"No, and I haven't got anything here to look it up in. Let me give you the number of the Poison Control Center."

"Thanks, I've already got it."

As Auburn was returning to the boardinghouse he saw a familiar figure scuttling along the sidewalk in the deep gloom of evening with a small suitcase under its arm.

"Leaving town, Mr. Bland?"

Bland nearly jumped out of his skin. "Oh no. Just stepping down to the bus station."

"With your suitcase? Why don't we go back to the house and see what's in it?"

Bland offered no resistance as Auburn took charge of the suitcase. Gardner and Drebber barely looked up from their chess game as Auburn led Bland through the parlor and back to the kitchen. He put the suitcase on the kitchen table and called up the back stairs for Kestrel to come down.

"This seems to be locked, Mr. Bland," he said. "Got the key handy?"

Bland, cowering in the corner, passed a tremulous hand over a tremulous jowl. "That's not my suitcase," he said. "Mrs. Helm asked me to put it in a pay locker down at the bus station for her."

"Do you know what's in it?"



monium chloride probably wouldn't be detected by the pending laboratory tests.

She swept Auburn and Kestrel with a scowl of defiance. "Those pills was my husband's, which he's been dead for seventeen years from blood pressure. I take them myself sometimes when my feet is swollen. But I never gave none of that medicine to Mr. Strode."

"You gave it to him, all right. Maybe it didn't work as fast on him as it did on Mr. Ambrose—"

"Mr. Ambrose!"

"—or on your husband."

Her complexion turned the color of slate. Auburn took another drink of water.

"When you went up there last night and saw that he was too weak to put up a fight, you burked him—sat or knelt on his chest and held the covers over his face until he stopped trying to breathe. He put up just enough of a struggle to knock the alarm clock off the night stand and break it."

"I never done that."

"Yes, you did, and I'll tell you how we can prove it. Mr. Schell, the undertaker, found Mr. Strode's mouth and throat full of green polyester fibers, and there were fresh cuts inside his mouth from his teeth. After Mr. Schell called us, Mr. Strode's body was removed from the funeral parlor to the coroner's

morgue, and this afternoon an autopsy showed three fresh rib fractures."

"That don't mean I had anything to do with it."

"Look at this quilt. What are those black marks all over it?"

"I don't know," she sulked, looking everywhere but at the quilt. "Probably some dirt Mr. Strode got into."

"That's black shoe polish, Mrs. Helm. And I don't think Officer Kestrel and the people at the forensic lab will have any trouble proving it's chemically identical to the polish on the shoes you're wearing right now."

He was far too polite to point out that, in addition, probably she alone in that house had sufficient avoirdupois to have burked Strode.

"After Mr. Stamaty was here, you took another look in Mr. Strode's room and noticed those marks your shoes had made on the quilt. So you hid it, and you sent Mr. Bland to get it out of the house along with the loot."

They took Mrs. Helm downtown to be booked, leaving her surviving boarders (two of whom had learned to play chess while serving stretches in prison) to fend for themselves and thank their stars they kept their meagre financial resources in the bank and had always been punctual with the rent.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

AT THE SIGN OF MERCURY

Maurice LeBlanc

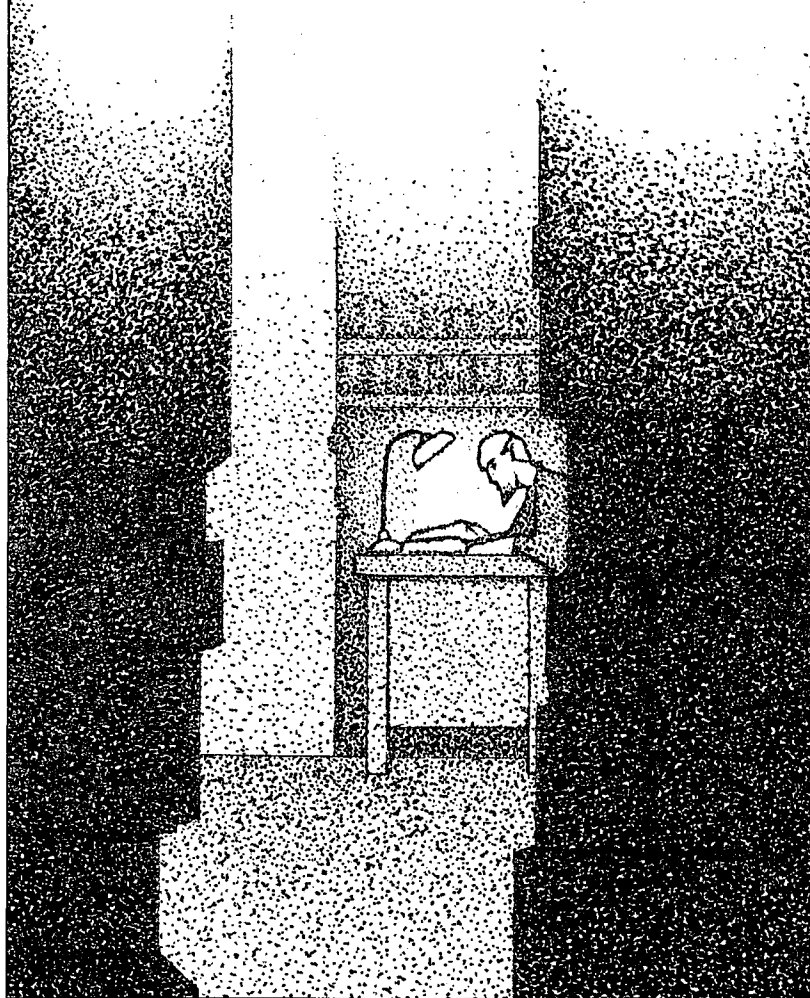


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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/99

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TO MADAME DANIE
LA RONCIÈRE
NEAR BASSICOURT

PARIS 30 NOVEMBER

My dearest friend—

There has been no letter from you for a fortnight, so I don't expect now to receive one for that troublesome date of the fifth of December which we fixed as the last day of our partnership. I rather wish it would come because you will then be released from a contract which no longer seems to give you pleasure. To me the seven battles which we fought and won together were a time of endless delight and enthusiasm. I was living beside you. I was conscious of all the good which that more active and stirring existence was doing you. My happiness was so great that I dared not speak of it to you or let you see anything of my secret feelings except my desire to please you and my passionate devotion. Today you have had enough of your brother in arms. Your will shall be law.

But, though I bow to your decree, may I remind you what it was that I always believed our final adventure would be? May I repeat your words, not one of which I have forgotten?

"I demand," you said, "that you shall restore to me a small, antique clasp made of a cornelian set in a filigree mount. It came to me from my mother; and everyone knew that it used to bring her happiness and me too. Since the day when it vanished from my jewel case, I have had nothing but unhappiness. Restore it to me, my good genius."

And when I asked you when the clasp had disappeared, you answered with a laugh, "Seven years ago . . . or eight . . . or nine: I don't know exactly. . . . I don't know when . . . I don't know how . . . I know nothing about it. . . ."

You were challenging me, were you not, and you set me that condition because it was one which I could not fulfill? Nevertheless, I promised, and I should like to keep my promise. What I have tried to do, in order to place life before you in a more favorable light, would seem purposeless if your confidence feels the lack of this talisman to which you attach so great a value. We must not laugh at these little superstitions. They are often the mainspring of our best actions.

Dear friend, if you had helped me, I should have achieved yet one more victory. Alone and hard pushed by the proximity of the date, I have failed, not however without placing things on such a footing that the undertaking, if you care to follow it up, has the greatest chance of success.

And you will follow it up, won't you? We have entered into a mutual agreement which we are bound to honor. It behooves us, within a fixed time, to inscribe in the book of our common life eight good stories, to which we shall have brought energy, logic, perseverance, some subtlety,

and occasionally a little heroism. This is the eighth of them. It is for you to act so that it may be written in its proper place on the fifth of December, before the clock strikes eight in the evening.

And on that day you will act as I shall now tell you.

First of all—and above all, my dear, do not complain that my instructions are fanciful: each of them is an indispensable condition of success—first of all, cut in your cousin's garden three slender lengths of rush. Plait them together and bind up the two ends so as to make a rude switch, like a child's whiplash.

When you get to Paris, buy a long necklace of jet beads cut into facets and shorten it so that it consists of seventy-five beads of almost equal size.

Under your winter cloak wear a blue woollen gown. On your head, a toque with red leaves on it. Round your neck, a feather boa. No gloves. No rings.

In the afternoon take a cab along the left bank of the river to the church of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont. At four o'clock exactly there will be, near the holy-water basin just inside the church, an old woman dressed in black, saying her prayers on a silver rosary. She will offer you holy water. Give her your necklace. She will count the beads and hand it back to you. After this you will walk behind her, you will cross an arm of the Seine, and she will lead you down a lonely street in the Ile Saint-Louis to a house which you will enter by yourself.

On the ground floor of this house you will find a youngish man with a very pasty complexion. Take off your cloak and then say to him: "I have come to fetch my clasp."

Do not be astonished by his agitation or dismay. Keep calm in his presence. If he questions you, if he wants to know your reason for applying to him or what impels you to make that request, give him no explanation. Your replies must be confined to these brief formulas: "I have come to fetch what belongs to me. I don't know you, I don't know your name, but I am obliged to come to you like this. I must have my clasp returned to me. I must."

I honestly believe that, if you have the firmness not to swerve from that attitude, whatever farce the man may play you will be completely successful. But the contest must be a short one, and the issue will depend solely on your confidence in yourself and your certainty of success. It will be a sort of match in which you must defeat your opponent in the first round. If you remain impassive, you will win. If you show hesitation or uneasiness, you can do nothing against him. He will escape you and regain the upper hand after a first moment of distress, and the game will be lost in a few minutes. There is no midway house between victory or . . . defeat.

In the latter event, you would be obliged—I beg you to pardon me for saying so—again to accept my collaboration. I offer it to you in advance,

my dear, and without any conditions, while stating quite plainly that all that I have been able to do for you and all that I may yet do gives me no other right than that of thanking you and devoting myself more than ever to the woman who represents my joy, my whole life.

Hortense, after reading the letter, folded it up and put it away at the back of a drawer, saying, in a resolute voice, "I sha'n't go."

To begin with, although she had formerly attached some slight importance to this trinket, which she had regarded as a mascot, she felt very little interest in it now that the period of her trials was apparently at an end. She could not forget that figure eight, which was the serial number of the next adventure. To launch herself upon it meant taking up the interrupted chain, going back to Rénine and giving him a pledge which, with his powers of suggestion, he would know how to turn to account.

Two days before the fifth of December she was still in the same frame of mind. So she was on the morning of the fourth, but suddenly, without even having to contend against preliminary subterfuges, she ran out into the garden, cut three lengths of rush, plaited them as she used to do in her childhood, and at twelve o'clock had herself driven to the station. She was uplifted by an eager curiosity. She was unable to resist all the amusing and novel sensations which the adventure proposed by Rénine promised her. It was really too tempting. The jet necklace, the toque with the autumn leaves, the old woman with the silver rosary—how could she resist their mysterious appeal, and how could she refuse this opportunity of showing Rénine what she was capable of doing?

And then, after all, she said to herself, laughing, he's summoning me to Paris. Now, eight o'clock is dangerous to me at a spot three hundred miles from Paris in that old deserted Château de Halingre, but nowhere else. The only clock that can strike the threatening hour is down there, under lock and key, a prisoner!

She reached Paris that evening. On the morning of the fifth she went out and bought a jet necklace which she reduced to seventy-five beads, put on a blue gown and a toque with red leaves, and at four o'clock precisely entered the church of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont.

Her heart was throbbing violently. This time she was alone, and how acutely she now felt the strength of that support which, from unreflecting fear rather than any reasonable motive, she had thrust aside! She looked around her, almost hoping to see him. But there was no one there . . . no one except an old lady in black, standing beside the holy water basin.

Hortense went up to her. The old lady, who held a silver rosary in her hands, offered her holy water and then began to count the beads of the necklace which Hortense gave her.

She whispered, "Seventy-five. That's right. Come."

Without another word she toddled along under the light of the streetlamps, crossed the Pont des Tournelles to the Ile Saint-Louis, and went down an empty street leading to a crossroads, where she stopped in front of an old house with wrought-iron balconies.

"Go in," she said.

And the old lady went away.

Hortense now saw a prosperous-looking shop which occupied almost the whole of the ground floor and whose windows, blazing with electric light, displayed a huddled array of old furniture and antiquities. She stood there for a few seconds gazing at it absently. A signboard bore the words *THE MERCURY* together with the name of the owner of the shop, "Pancaldi." Higher up, on a projecting cornice which ran on a level with the first floor, a small niche sheltered a terra cotta Mercury poised on one foot, with wings to his sandals and the caduceus in his hand, who, as Hortense noted, was leaning a little too far forward in the ardor of his flight and ought logically to have lost his balance and taken a header into the street.

"Now!" she said under her breath.

She turned the handle of the door and walked in.

Despite the ringing of the bells actuated by the opening door, no one came to meet her. The shop seemed to be empty. However, at the extreme end there was a room at the back of the shop and after that another, both crammed with furniture and knickknacks, many of which looked very valuable. Hortense followed a narrow gangway which twisted and turned between two walls built up of cupboards, cabinets and console tables, went up two steps, and found herself in the last room of all.

A man was sitting at a writing desk and looking through some account books. Without turning his head, he said, "I am at your service, madam. . . . Please look round you. . . ."

This room contained nothing but articles of a special character which gave it the appearance of some alchemist's laboratory in the middle ages: stuffed owls, skeletons, skulls, copper alembics, astrolabes and all around, hanging on the walls, amulets of every description, mainly hands of ivory or coral with two fingers pointing to ward off ill luck.

"Are you wanting anything in particular, madam?" asked M. Pancaldi, closing his desk and rising from his chair.

It's the man, thought Hortense.

He had in fact an uncommonly pasty complexion. A little forked beard, flecked with grey, lengthened his face, which was surmounted by a bald, pallid forehead beneath which gleamed a pair of small, prominent, restless, shift-y eyes.

Hortense, who had not removed her veil or cloak replied, "I want a clasp."

"They're in this showcase," he said, leading the way to the connecting room.

Hortense glanced over the glass case and said, "No, no, . . . I don't see what I'm looking for. I don't want just any clasp but a clasp which I lost out of a jewel case some years ago and which I have come to look for here."

She was astounded to see the commotion displayed on his features. His eyes became haggard.

"Here? . . . I don't think you are in the least likely . . . What sort of clasp is it?"

"A cornelian, mounted in gold filigree . . . of the 1830 period."

"I don't understand," he stammered. "Why do you come to me?"

She now removed her veil and laid aside her cloak.

He stepped back, as though terrified by the sight of her, and whispered: "The blue gown! . . . The toque! . . . And—can I believe my eyes?—the jet necklace!"

It was perhaps the whiplash formed of three rushes that excited him most violently. He pointed his finger at it, began to stagger where he stood, and ended by beating the air with his arms like a drowning man and fainting away in a chair.

Hortense did not move.

"Whatever farce he may play," Rénine had written, "have the courage to remain impassive."

Perhaps he was not playing a farce. Nevertheless she forced herself to be calm and indifferent.

This lasted for a minute or two, after which M. Pancaldi recovered from his swoon, wiped away the perspiration streaming down his forehead and, striving to control himself, resumed, in a trembling voice:

"Why do you apply to me?"

"Because the clasp is in your possession."

"Who told you that?" he said, without denying the accusation. "How do you know?"

"I know because it is so. Nobody has told me anything. I came here positive that I should find my clasp and with the immovable determination to take it away with me."

"But do you know me? Do you know my name?"

"I don't know you. I did not know your name before I read it over your shop. To me you are simply the man who is going to give me back what belongs to me."

He was greatly agitated. He kept on walking to and fro in a small empty space surrounded by a circle of piled-up furniture at which he hit out idiotically, at the risk of bringing it down.

Hortense felt that she had the whip hand of him, and profiting by his confusion, she said suddenly, in a commanding and threatening tone, "Where is the thing? You must give it back to me. I insist upon it."

Pancaldi gave way to a moment of despair. He folded his hands and mumbled a few words of entreaty. Then, defeated and suddenly resigned, he said, more distinctly, "You insist?"

"I do. You must give it to me."

"Yes, yes, I must . . . I agree."

"Speak!" she ordered, more harshly still.

"Speak, no, but write: I will write my secret. . . . And that will be the end of me."

He turned to his desk and feverishly wrote a few lines on a sheet of paper, which he put into an envelope and sealed it.

"See," he said, "here's my secret. . . . It was my whole life."

And, so saying, he suddenly pressed against his temple a revolver which he had produced from under a pile of papers and fired.

With a quick movement Hortense struck up his arm.

The bullet struck the mirror of a cheval-glass. But Pancaldi collapsed and began to groan as though he were wounded.

Hortense made a great effort not to lose her composure.

Rénine warned me, she reflected. The man's a play-actor. He has kept the envelope. He has kept his revolver. I won't be taken in by him.

Nevertheless, she realized that, despite his apparent calmness, the attempt at suicide and the revolver shot had completely unnerved her. All her energies were dispersed, like the sticks of a bundle whose string has been cut, and she had a painful impression that the man, who was grovelling at her feet, was in reality slowly getting the better of her.

She sat down, exhausted. As Rénine had foretold, the duel had not lasted longer than a few minutes, but it was she who had succumbed, thanks to her feminine nerves and at the very moment when she felt entitled to believe that she had won.

The man Pancaldi was fully aware of this, and, without troubling to invent a transition, he ceased his jeremiads, leapt to his feet, cut a sort of agile caper before Hortense's eyes, and cried, in a jeering tone, "Now we are going to have a little chat, but it would be a nuisance to be at the mercy of the first passing customer, wouldn't it?"

He ran to the street door, opened it, and pulled down the iron shutter which closed the shop. Then, still hopping and skipping, he came back to Hortense.

"Oof! I really thought I was done for! One more effort, madam, and you would have pulled it off. But then I'm such a simple chap! It seemed to me that you had come from the back of beyond, as an emissary of Providence, to call me to account, and, like a fool I was about to give the thing back. . . . Ah, Mlle. Hortense—let me call you so: I used

to know you by that name—Mlle. Hortense, the time has come to speak out. Who contrived this business? Not you, eh? It's not in your style. Then who? I have always been honest in my life, scrupulously honest . . . except once . . . in the matter of that clasp. And whereas I thought the story was buried and forgotten, here it is suddenly raked up again. Why? That's what I want to know."

Hortense was no longer even attempting to fight. He was bringing to bear upon her all his virile strength, all his spite, all his fears, all the threats expressed in his furious gestures and on his features, which were both ridiculous and evil. "Speak, I want to know. If I have a secret foe, let me defend myself against him! Who is he? Who sent you here? Who urged you to take action? Is it a rival incensed by my good luck who wants in his turn to benefit by the clasp? Speak, can't you, damn it all . . . or, I swear by Heaven, I'll make you!"

She had an idea that he was reaching out for his revolver and stepped back, holding her arms before her, in the hope of escaping.

They thus struggled against each other; and Hortense, who was becoming more and more frightened, not so much of the attack as of her assailant's distorted face, was beginning to scream when Pancaldi suddenly stood motionless with his arms before him, his fingers outstretched and his eyes staring above Hortense's head.

"Who's there? How did you get in?" he asked, in a stifled voice.

Hortense did not even need to turn round to feel assured that Rénine was coming to her assistance and that it was his inexplicable appearance that was causing the dealer such dismay. As a matter of fact a slender figure stole through a heap of easy chairs and sofas, and Rénine came forward with a tranquil step.

"Who are you?" repeated Pancaldi. "Where do you come from?"

"From up there," he said very amiably, pointing to the ceiling.

"From up there?"

"Yes, from the first floor. I have been the tenant of the floor above this for the past three months. I heard a noise just now. Someone was calling out for help. So I came down."

"But how did you get in here?"

"By the staircase."

"What staircase?"

"The iron staircase at the end of the shop. The man who owned it before you had a flat on my floor and used to go up and down by that hidden staircase. You had the door shut off. I opened it."

"But by what right, sir? It amounts to breaking in."

"Breaking in is allowed when there's a fellow creature to be rescued."

"Once more, who are you?"

"Prince Rénine . . . and a friend of this lady's," said Rénine, bending over Hortense and kissing her hand.

Pancaldi seemed to be choking, and mumbled, "Oh, I understand! . . . You instigated the plot . . . it was you who sent the lady."

"It was, M. Pancaldi, it was!"

"And what are your intentions?"

"My intentions are irreproachable. No violence. Simply a little interview. When that is over, you will hand over what I in my turn have come to fetch."

"What?"

"The clasp."

"That, never!" shouted the dealer.

"Don't say no. It's a foregone conclusion."

"No power on earth, sir, can compel me to do such a thing!"

"Shall we send for your wife? Madame Pancaldi will perhaps realize the position better than you do."

The idea of no longer being alone with this unexpected adversary seemed to appeal to Pancaldi. There was a bell on the table beside him. He struck it three times.

"Capital!" exclaimed Rénine. "You see, my dear, M. Pancaldi is becoming quite amiable. Not a trace left of the devil broken loose who was going for you just now. No, M. Pancaldi only has to find himself dealing with a man to recover his qualities of courtesy and kindness. A perfect sheep! Which does not mean that things will go quite of themselves. Far from it! There's no more obstinate animal than a sheep."

Right at the end of the shop, between the dealer's writing desk and the winding staircase, a curtain was raised, admitting a woman who was holding a door open. She might have been thirty years of age. Very simply dressed, she looked, with the apron on her, more like a cook than like the mistress of a household. But she had an attractive face and a pleasing figure. Hortense, who had followed Rénine, was surprised to recognize her as a maid whom she had had in her service when a girl.

"What! Is that you, Lucienne? Are you Mme. Pancaldi?"

The newcomer looked at her, recognized her also, and seemed embarrassed. Rénine said to her, "Your husband and I need your assistance, Mme. Pancaldi, to settle a rather complicated matter . . . a matter in which you played an important part."

She came forward without a word, obviously ill at ease, asking her husband, who did not take his eyes off her, "What is it? . . . What do they want with me? . . . What is he referring to?"

"It's about the clasp!" Pancaldi whispered under his breath.

These few words were enough to make Mme. Pancaldi realize to the full the seriousness of her position. And she did not try to keep her countenance or to retort with futile protests. She sank into a chair, sighing, "Oh, that's it! . . . I understand. . . . Mlle. Hortense has found the track. . . . Oh, it's all up with us!"

There was a moment's respite. The struggle between the adversaries had hardly begun before the husband and wife adopted the attitude of defeated persons whose only hope lay in the victor's clemency. Staring motionless before her, Mme. Pancaldi began to cry. Rénine bent over her and said, "Do you mind if we go over the case from the beginning? We shall then see things more clearly, and I am sure that our interview will lead to a perfectly natural solution. . . . This is how things happened: nine years ago, when you were lady's maid to Mlle. Hortense in the country, you made the acquaintance of M. Pancaldi, who soon became your lover. You were both of you Corsicans; in other words, you came from a country where superstitions are very strong and where questions of good and bad luck, the evil eye, and spells and charms exert a profound influence over the lives of one and all. Now it was said that your young mistress's clasp had always brought luck to its owners. That was why, in a weak moment prompted by M. Pancaldi, you stole the clasp. Six months afterwards, you became Mme. Pancaldi. . . . That is your whole story, is it not, told in a few sentences? The whole story of two people who would have remained honest members of society if they had been able to resist that casual temptation? . . . I need not tell you how you both succeeded in life and how, possessing the talisman, believing its powers and trusting in yourselves, you rose to the first rank of antiquarians. Today, well-off, owning this shop, The Mercury, you attribute the success of your undertakings to that clasp. To lose it would to your eyes spell bankruptcy and poverty. Your whole life has been centered upon it. It is your fetish. It is the little household god who watches over you and guides your steps. It is there, somewhere, hidden in this jungle; and no one of course would ever have suspected anything—for I repeat, you are decent people but for this one lapse—if an accident had not led me to look into your affairs."

Rénine paused and continued, "That was two months ago, two months of minute investigations, which presented no difficulty to me because, having discovered your trail, I hired the flat overhead and was able to use that staircase . . . but, all the same, two months wasted to a certain extent because I have not yet succeeded. And Heaven knows how I have ransacked this shop of yours! There is not a piece of furniture that I have left unsearched, not a plank in the floor that I have not inspected. All to no purpose. Yes, there was one thing, an incidental discovery. In a secret recess in your writing table, Pancaldi, I turned up a little account book in which you have set down your remorse, your uneasiness, your fear of punishment, and your dread of God's wrath. . . . It was highly imprudent of you, Pancaldi! People don't write such confessions! And, above all, they don't leave them lying about! Be this as it may, I read them and I noted one passage which struck me as particularly important and was of use to me in preparing my plan of campaign:

'Should she come to me, the woman whom I robbed, should she come to me as I saw her in her garden while Lucienne was taking the clasp; should she appear to me wearing the blue gown and the toque of red leaves, with the jet necklace and the whip of three plaited rushes which she was carrying that day; should she appear to me thus and say, "I have come to claim my property," then I shall understand that her conduct is inspired from on high and that I must obey the decree of Providence.' That is what is written in your book, Pancaldi, and it explains the conduct of the lady whom you call Mlle. Hortense. Acting on my instructions and in accordance with the setting thought out by yourself, she came to you, from the back of beyond, to use your own expression. A little more self-possession on her part and you know that she would have won the day. Unfortunately, you are a wonderful actor; your sham suicide put her out; and you understood that this was not a decree of Providence but simply an offensive on the part of your former victim. I had no choice, therefore, but to intervene. Here I am. . . . And now let's finish the business. Pancaldi, that clasp!"

"No," said the dealer, who seemed to recover all his energy at the very thought of restoring the clasp.

"And you, Mme. Pancaldi."

"I don't know where it is," the wife declared.

"Very well. Then let us come to deeds. Mme. Pancaldi, you have a son of seven whom you love with all your heart. This is Thursday, and as on every Thursday your little boy is to come home alone from his aunt's. Two of my friends are posted on the road by which he returns and in the absence of instructions to the contrary will kidnap him as he passes."

Madame Pancaldi lost her head at once. "My son! Oh, please, please . . . not that! . . . I swear that I know nothing. My husband would never consent to confide in me."

Rénine continued. "Next point. This evening I shall lodge an information with the public prosecutor. Evidence: the confessions in the account book. Consequences: action by the police, search of the premises and the rest."

Pancaldi was silent. The others had a feeling that all these threats did not affect him and that, protected by his fetish, he believed himself to be invulnerable. But his wife fell on her knees at Rénine's feet and stammered, "No, no . . . I entreat you! . . . It would mean going to prison and I don't want to go! . . . And then my son! . . . Oh, I entreat you! . . ."

Hortense, seized with compassion, took Rénine to one side.

"Poor woman! Let me intercede for her."

"Set your mind at rest," he said. "Nothing is going to happen to her son."

"But your two friends?"

"Sheer bluff."

"Your application to the public prosecutor?"

"A mere threat."

"Then what are you trying to do?"

"To frighten them out of their wits in the hope of making them drop a remark, a word, which will tell us what we want to know. We've tried every other means. This is the last, and it is a method which, I find, nearly always succeeds. Remember our adventures."

"But if the word which you expect to hear is not spoken?"

"It must be spoken," said Rénine in a low voice. "We must finish the matter. The hour is at hand."

His eyes met hers, and she blushed crimson at the thought that the hour to which he was alluding was the eighth and that he had no other object than to finish the matter before that eighth hour struck.

"So you see, on the one hand, what you are risking," he said to the Pancaldi pair. "The disappearance of your child . . . and prison, prison for certain, since there is the book with its confessions. And now, on the other hand, here's my offer: twenty thousand francs if you hand over the clasp immediately, this minute. Remember, it isn't worth three louis."

No reply. Madame Pancaldi was crying.

Rénine resumed, pausing between each proposal.

"I'll double my offer. . . . I'll treble it. . . . Hang it all, Pancaldi, you're unreasonable! . . . I suppose you want me to make it a round sum? All right: a hundred thousand francs."

He held out his hand as if there was no doubt that they would give him the clasp.

Madame Pancaldi was the first to yield and did so with a sudden outburst of rage against her husband.

"Well, confess, can't you? Speak up! Where have you hidden it? . . . Look here, you aren't going to be obstinate, what? If you are, it means ruin and poverty. And then there's our boy! Speak out, do!"

Hortense whispered, "Rénine, this is madness; the clasp has no value."

"Never fear," said Rénine, "he's not going to accept. But look at him. . . . How excited he is! Exactly what I wanted. . . . Ah, this, you know, is really exciting! . . . To make people lose their heads! To rob them of all control over what they are thinking and saying! . . . And, in the midst of this confusion, in the storm that tosses them to and fro, to catch sight of the tiny spark which will flash forth somewhere or other! . . . Look at him! Look at the fellow! A hundred thousand francs for a valueless pebble . . . if not, prison: it's enough to turn any man's head!"

Pancaldi, in fact, was grey in the face; his lips were trembling, and a drop of saliva was trickling from their corners. It was easy to guess the

seething turmoil of his whole being, shaken by conflicting emotions, by the clash between greed and fear. Suddenly he burst out, and it was obvious that his words were pouring forth at random, without his knowing in the least what he was saying.

"A hundred thousand francs! Two hundred thousand! Five hundred thousand! A million! A two fig for your millions! What's the use of millions? One loses them. They disappear . . . they go. . . there's only one thing that counts: luck. It's on your side or else against you. And luck has been on my side these last nine years. It has never betrayed me, and you expect me to betray it? Why? Out of fear? Prison? My son? Bosh! . . . No harm will come to me so long as I compel luck to work on my behalf. It's my servant, it's my friend. It clings to the clasp. How? How can I tell? It's the cornelian, no doubt. . . . There are magic stones which hold happiness as others hold fire or sulphur, or gold."

Rénine kept his eyes fixed upon him, watching for the least word, the least modulation of the voice. The curiosity dealer was now laughing with a nervous laugh while resuming the self-control of a man who feels sure of himself, and he walked up to Rénine with jerky movements that revealed an increasing resolution.

"Millions? My dear sir, I wouldn't have them as a gift. The little bit of stone which I possess is worth much more than that. And the proof of it lies in all the pains which you are at to take it from me. Aha! Months devoted to looking for it as you yourself confess! Months in which you turned everything topsy-turvy, while I, who suspected nothing, did not even defend myself! Why should I? The little thing defended itself all alone. . . . It does not want to be discovered and it sha'n't be. . . . It likes being here. . . . It presides over a good, honest business that satisfies it. . . . Pancaldi's luck! Why, it's known to all the neighborhood, among all the dealers! I proclaim it from the housetops: 'I'm a lucky man!' I even made so bold as to take the god of luck, Mercury, as my patron! He too protects me. See, I've got Mercuries all over my shop! Look up there on that shelf, a whole row of statuettes like the one over the front door, proofs signed by a great sculptor who went smash and sold them to me. . . . Would you like one, my dear sir? It will bring you luck, too. Take your pick! A present from Pancaldi to make up to you for your defeat! Does that suit you?"

He put a stool against the wall under the shelf, took down a statuette, and plumped it into Rénine's arms. And laughing heartily, growing more and more excited as his enemy seemed to yield ground and to fall back before his spirited attack, he explained, "Well done! He accepts! And the fact that he accepts shows that we are all agreed! Mme. Pancaldi, don't distress yourself. Your son's coming back, and nobody's going to prison! Goodbye, Mlle. Hortense! Good day, sir! Hope to see you again! If you want to speak to me at any time, just give three

thumps on the ceiling. Goodbye . . . don't forget your present . . . and may Mercury be kind to you! Goodbye, my dear prince! Goodbye, Mlle. Hortense! . . ."

He hustled them to the iron staircase, gripped each of them by the arm in turn, and pushed them up to the little door hidden at the top of the stairs.

And the strange thing was that Rénine made no protest. He did not attempt to resist. He allowed himself to be led along like a naughty child that is taken up to bed.

Less than five minutes had elapsed between the moment when he made his offer to Pancaldi and the moment when Pancaldi turned him out of the shop with a statuette in his arms.

The dining room and drawing room of the flat which Rénine had taken on the first floor looked out upon the street. The table in the dining room was laid for two.

"Forgive me, won't you?" said Rénine as he opened the door of the drawing room for Hortense. "I thought that, whatever happened, I should most likely see you this evening and that we might as well dine together. Don't refuse me this kindness, which will be the last favor granted in our last adventure."

Hortense did not refuse him. The manner in which the battle had ended was so different from everything that she had seen hitherto that she felt disconcerted. At any rate, why should she refuse, seeing that the terms of the contract had not been fulfilled?

Rénine left the room to give an order to his manservant. Two minutes later he came back for Hortense. It was then a little past seven.

There were flowers on the table, and the statue of Mercury, Pancaldi's present, stood overtopping them.

"May the god of luck preside over our repast," said Rénine.

He was full of animation and expressed his great delight at having her sitting opposite him:

"Yes," he exclaimed, "I had to resort to powerful means and attract you by the bait of the most fabulous enterprises. You must confess that my letter was jolly smart! The three rushes, the blue gown; simply irresistible! And when I had thrown in a few puzzles of my own invention, such as the seventy-five beads of the necklace and the old woman with the silver rosary, I knew that you were bound to succumb to the temptation. Don't be angry with me. I wanted to see you and I wanted it to be today. You have come, and I thank you."

He next told her how he had got on the track of the stolen trinket.

"You hoped, didn't you, in laying down that condition, that I shouldn't be able to fulfill it? You made a mistake, my dear. The test, at least at the beginning, was easy enough because it was based upon an un-

doubted fact: the talismanic character attributed to the clasp. I had only to hunt about and see whether among the people around you, among your servants, there was ever anyone upon whom that character may have exercised some attraction. Now, on the list of persons which I succeeded in drawing up I at once noticed the name of Mlle. Lucienne, as coming from Corsica. This was my starting point. The rest was a mere concatenation of events."

Hortense stared at him in amazement. How was it that he was accepting his defeat with such a careless air and even talking in a tone of triumph, whereas really he had been soundly beaten by Pancaldi and even made to look just a trifle ridiculous?

She could not help letting him feel this, and the fashion in which she did so betrayed a certain disappointment, a certain humiliation: "Everything is a concatenation of events: very well. But the chain is broken because, when all is said, though you know the thief, you did not succeed in laying hands upon the stolen clasp."

The reproach was obvious. Rénine had not accustomed her to failure. And furthermore she was irritated to see how heedlessly he was accepting a blow which, after all, entailed the ruin of any hopes that he might have entertained.

He did not reply. He had filled their two glasses with champagne and was slowly emptying his own with his eyes fixed on the statuette of Mercury. He turned it about on its pedestal and examined it with the eye of a delighted connoisseur.

"What a beautiful thing is a harmonious line! Color does not uplift me so much as outline, proportion, symmetry, and all the wonderful properties of form. Look at this little statue. Pancaldi's right: it's the work of a great artist. The legs are both slender and muscular; the whole figure gives an impression of buoyancy and speed. It is very well done. There's only one fault, a very slight one: perhaps you've not noticed it?"

"Yes, I have," said Hortense. "It struck me the moment I saw the sign, outside. You mean, don't you, a certain lack of balance? The god is leaning over too far on the leg that carries him. He looks as though he were going to pitch forward."

"That's very clever of you," said Rénine. "The fault is almost imperceptible, and it needs a trained eye to see it. Really, however, as a matter of logic, the weight of the body ought to have its way, and, in accordance with natural laws the little god ought to take a header."

After a pause he continued. "I noticed that flaw on the first day. How was it that I did not draw an inference at once? I was shocked because the artist had sinned against an æsthetic law, whereas I ought to have been shocked because he had overlooked a physical law. As though art and nature were not blended together! And as though the laws of gravity could be disturbed without some fundamental reason!"

"What do you mean?" asked Hortense, puzzled by these reflections, which seemed so far removed from their secret thoughts. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing!" he said. "I am only surprised that I didn't understand sooner why Mercury did not plump forward, as he should have done."

"And what is the reason?"

"The reason? I imagine that Pancaldi, when pulling the statuette about to make it serve his purpose, must have disturbed its balance, but that this balance was restored by something which holds the little god back and which makes up for his really too dangerous posture."

"Something, you say?"

"Yes, a counterweight."

Hortense gave a start. She too was beginning to see a little light. She murmured, "A counterweight? . . . Are you thinking that it might be . . . in the pedestal?"

"Why not?"

"Is that possible? But if so, how did Pancaldi come to give you this statuette?"

"He never gave me this one," Rénine declared. "I took this one myself."

"But where? And when?"

"Just now, while you were in the drawing room. I got out of that window, which is just over the signboard and beside the niche containing the little god. And I exchanged the two, that is to say, I took the statue which was outside and put the one which Pancaldi gave me in its place."

"But doesn't that one lean forward?"

"No, no more than the others do, on the shelf in his shop. But Pancaldi is not an artist. A lack of equilibrium does not impress him; he will see nothing wrong, and he will continue to think himself favored by luck, which is another way of saying that luck will continue to favor him. Meanwhile, here's the statuette, the one used for the sign. Am I to break the pedestal and take your clasp out of the leaden sheath, soldered to the back of the pedestal, which keeps Mercury steady?"

"No, no, there's no need for that," Hortense hurriedly murmured.

Rénine's intuition, his subtlety, the skill with which he had managed the whole business: to her, for the moment, all these things remained in the background. But she suddenly remembered that the eighth adventure was completed, that Rénine had surmounted every obstacle, that the test had turned to his advantage, and that the extreme limit of time fixed for the last of the adventures was not yet reached.

He had the cruelty to call attention to the fact.

"A quarter to eight," he said.

An oppressive silence fell between them. Both felt its discomfort to

such a degree that they hesitated to make the least movement. In order to break it, Rénine jested, "That worthy M. Pancaldi, how good it was of him to tell me what I wished to know! I knew, however, that by exasperating him, I should end by picking up the missing clue in what he said. It was just as though one were to hand some one a flint and steel and suggest to him that he was to use it. In the end the spark is obtained. In my case, what produced the spark was the unconscious but inevitable comparison which he drew between the cornelian clasp, the element of luck, and Mercury, the god of luck. That was enough. I understood that this association of ideas arose from his having actually associated the two factors of luck by embodying one in the other, or, to speak more plainly, by hiding the trinket in the statuette. And I at once remembered the Mercury outside the door and its defective poise . . ."

Rénine suddenly interrupted himself. It seemed to him that all his remarks were falling on deaf ears. Hortense had put her hand to her forehead and, thus veiling her eyes, sat motionless and remote.

She was indeed not listening. The end of this particular adventure and the manner in which Rénine had acted on this occasion no longer interested her. What she was thinking of was the complex series of adventures amid which she had been living for the past three months and the wonderful behavior of the man who had offered her his devotion. She saw, as in a magic picture, the fabulous deeds performed by him, all the good that he had done, the lives saved, the sorrows assuaged, the order restored wherever his masterly will had been brought to bear. Nothing was impossible to him. What he undertook to do he did. Every aim that he set before him was attained in advance. And all this without excessive effort, with the calmness of one who knows his own strength and knows that nothing can resist it.

Then what could she do against him? Why should she defend herself and how? If he demanded that she should yield, would he not know how to make her do so and would this last adventure be any more difficult for him than the others? Supposing that she ran away: did the wide world contain a retreat in which she would be safe from his pursuit? From the first moment of their first meeting, the end was certain, since Rénine had decreed that it should be so.

However, she still cast about for weapons, for protection of some sort, and she said to herself that, though he had fulfilled the eight conditions and restored the cornelian clasp to her before the eighth hour had struck, she was nevertheless protected by the fact that this eighth hour was to strike on the clock of the Château de Halingre and not elsewhere. It was a formal compact. Rénine had said that day, gazing on the lips which he longed to kiss:

"The old brass pendulum will start swinging again; and, when, on the fixed date, the clock once more eight, then . . ."

She looked up. He was not moving either but sat solemnly, patiently waiting.

She was on the point of saying, she was even preparing her words:

"You know, our agreement says it must be the Halingre clock. All the other conditions have been fulfilled . . . but not this one. So I am free, am I not? I am entitled not to keep my promise, which, moreover, I never made, but which in any case falls to the ground? . . . And I am perfectly free . . . released from any scruple of conscience?"

She had not time to speak. At that precise moment there was a click behind her, like that of a clock about to strike.

A first stroke sounded, then a second, then a third.

Hortense moaned. She had recognized the very sound of the old clock, the Halingre clock, which three months ago, by breaking in a supernatural manner the silence of the deserted château, had set both of them on the road of the eight adventures.

She counted the strokes. The clock struck eight.

"Ah!" she murmured, half swooning and hiding her face in her hands. "The clock . . . the clock is here . . . the one from over there . . . I recognize its voice."

She said no more. She felt that Rénine had his eyes fixed upon her, and this sapped all her energies. Besides, had she been able to recover them, she would have been no better off nor sought to offer him the least resistance for the reason that she did not wish to resist. All the adventures were over, but one remained to be undertaken, the anticipation of which wiped out the memory of all the rest. It was the adventure of love, the most delightful, the most bewildering, the most adorable of all adventures. She accepted fate's decree, rejoicing in all that might come, because she was in love. She smiled in spite of herself as she reflected that happiness was again to enter her life at the very moment when her well-beloved was bringing her the cornelian clasp.

The clock struck the hour for the second time.

Hortense raised her eyes to Rénine. She struggled a few seconds longer. But she was like a charmed bird, incapable of any movement of revolt; and at the eighth stroke she fell upon his breast and offered him her lips. . . .

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



Tami Hoag, author of the bestselling thrillers *Night Sins* and *Guilty as Sin*, has a new book that promises to keep readers up reading into the night. At the heart of *Ashes to Ashes* (Bantam, \$24.95) is Kate Conlan. Once with the FBI, Kate now works as a child victim/witness advocate at a government social service agency. When a serial killer ignites the corpses of his victims around town, Kate is brought in to work with a teenager who apparently witnessed the most recent bonfire. The heat is turned up when a powerful local billionaire reports his own teenage daughter missing. Before Kate can determine whether her client is the missing heiress—not to mention whether she is something more than victim or witness—the girl runs away. Big, complex, and very twisty with a lot of bang for the buck.

Mary Russell and her mentor Sherlock Holmes return in Laurie King's *O Jerusalem* (Bantam, \$23.95). The year is 1918. Holmes and his young apprentice need to get out of England for a time, and brother Mycroft has just the place for them. It seems that he has a small job for the duo in Palestine, an investigation into a series of murders. The result is a trip indeed for readers—not only a journey back in time, but also a pilgrimage into an entirely different culture and a peek beneath ancient veils of politics and religion. King's impeccable research combines with her colorful, fully drawn characters to make this another memorable addition to a strong series.

Sins of a Shaker Summer, Deborah Woodworth's third entry in her Sister Rose series, should expand the growing number of fans who find this period setting so fresh and the author's presentation so convincing (Avon, \$5.99). Set during the Depression, the novel takes place in North Homage, Kentucky, at one of a shrinking number of the Shaker Believers' communities. The sale of herbs grown and dried by the Shakers is a large source of their livelihood, yet no one among them can identify the dangerous plant that two of their children have ingested. As the girls lie in the infirmary, their new Eldress searches for the an-

swer to this question and others. Her investigation leads her to a new group of Believers, an old legend surrounding a sacred hill nearby, and a very, very old tale of murder.

As always, Carole Berry finds both merriment and murder in today's workday world when her intrepid temp, Bonnie Indermill, gets involved in the **Death of a Downsizer** (Berkley, \$5.99). Bonnie may be new to her job, but it doesn't take her long to pick up on the undercurrents at Manhattan's Richards & Goode Corporation. Everyone is fearful of the new CEO, Dorfmeier, who has made his reputation slashing personnel in preparation for a company's takeover. Worse in Bonnie's opinion, the man is a tyrant with absolutely no people skills and not an ounce of humor. Yet, it looks as if her own future is rosy—another recent employee, the highly placed assistant to the CEO, turns out to be an old school friend of Bonnie's brother. The moral of the story: Don't count your paychecks before the envelopes come. If Dilbert read mysteries, Carole Berry's would be at the top of his list.

K. K. Beck has whipped up a delightful concoction with **The Revenge of Kali-Ra** (Mysterious Press, \$22). Hollywood beauty and topearner at the box office, Nadia Wentworth discovers the pulp novels of a 1920's author whose lurid tales feature the beautiful and immortal Queen of Doom, Kali-Ra, and is dead set to star in a Kali-Ra movie. Nadia's decision, though, lures a cast of oddballs to her exotic mansion; thus the scene is set for a weekend murder mystery wherein houseguests are picked off one by one. Witty repartee and an engaging troupe of characters, sprinkled with the purple prose of the pulp novels, add up to a rollicking good time.

Crewel World (Berkley, \$5.99) by Monica Ferris introduces a new series that centers around a cosy needlework shop in a small town. Ferris (an old hand writing under a new pseudonym) has included all the elements that please readers of gentle whodunits. There's Betsy Devonshire, newly arrived in town to stay with her widowed sister Margot, a woman with some years under her belt, her wits about her, and a passion for justice. Margot is surrounded by several engaging cohorts and a colorful cast of townsfolk. And there's a charming, friendly shop where mystery-loving needleworkers are certain to pick up some handy tips simply by eavesdropping on conversations. (There's even a free needlepoint pattern included in the book.) A new series that's bound to find loyal fans quickly.

Pick up Carolyn Hart's latest Henrie O caper and sink back with a sigh—you're in the hands of a mistress of mystery. **Death in Paradise** (Avon, \$22) takes the no-nonsense senior sleuth to the lovely city of San Antonio in search of her dear friend's granddaughter Iris. She had been working for the Tesoros Gallery on the city's exclusive River Walk when her regular check-in calls to her grandmother abruptly stopped. What Henrie O finds is Iris's ransacked apartment and her inexplicable absence from work—not to mention several puzzling responses to Hen-

rie's questions from various Tesoros family members. You're in good hands as Henrie O visits a city, learns a bit about Mexican art, and exposes a dark secret to the light of day.

Stir together several historical incidents, add an engaging amateur sleuth, and sprinkle the mix with the right amount of expert lore. What you get is Aaron Elkins' delightful and satisfying novel, **Loot** (Morrow, \$24). Ben Revere is a surprisingly young man considering that he's already an ex-husband, an ex-professor, an ex-businessman, and an ex-curator. He lives modestly in Boston, surviving off investments and an occasional consulting job as an art expert. One day a man rushes into a rundown pawnshop owned by an old Russian friend of Ben's and leaves behind a painting by Velázquez that was thought to have been lost during the Nazi occupation. This incident triggers murder and ignites a misplaced passion in Ben—this time for justice. Tag along as he travels to some of Europe's grandest cities, joins forces with an elderly count and a strong-minded young woman, visits the underground caverns that served as Hitler's treasure vaults, and dodges dangers along a serpentine path that follows the painting's provenance. This book is a treat.

You don't need to time-travel to South Dakota in your old jalopy to run into Carl Wilcox painting a sign, politely flirting with a lady, drinking a cold beer out of a sweating can, and poking his nose into crime. Just pick up Harold Adams' **No Badge, No Gun** (Walker, \$21.95). Carl's reputation as a man with a knack for catching killers has preceded him this time to the small town of Jonesville. And Jonesville is a town desperate to catch a killer—the victim is the teenage niece of the local pastor. The community wants to believe that the deed was done by a stranger just passing through. After all, the sheriff has no leads, and the search seems to be at a dead end. Trouble is, nobody quite buys that theory.

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THE STORY THAT WON



The January Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Douglas Empringham of San Bruno, California. Honorable mentions go to C. T. Landry of La-Place, Louisiana; Lisa J. Aldrich of Elmwood, Massachusetts; Donna G. Hunt of Bonaire, Georgia; J. Frank Peirce of

Bryan, Texas; Thomas H. Keffer of Homer, Alaska; Al Cross of Sacramento, California; Ida Larson of Ocean-side, California; Robert G. Stewart of Walnut Creek, California; Mark Truman of Tustin, California; and Alice J. Godfrey of Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

LOBOLAND DAYS by Douglas Empringham

Being anxious made his disguise more convincing, but it was also putting a strain on his confidence. Where the fang was Lobolew? Lobowill wanted to know.

It *was* a brilliant scheme. Why grab one or two when they could divide the herd and get away with many? And he'd put on a fleece and endured sheepdip, so he'd done his part.

Lobowill glanced at the sign again. **SOFT SHOULDERS.** Exactly where Lobolew had told him to wait. Except . . . being surrounded by temptation was making him drool.

He decided to move to the edge of the flock and get a grip on his hunger before he bit a walking roast and blew his cover.

Then he saw the dog. And it wasn't the border collie he'd seen earlier. *Oh no! a . . . a wolfhound!* Wolfsbane supreme. Then he saw a second hulking and long-jawed wolfkiller.

Lobolew! You're on your own!

But when he reached the far side of the flock, he found his oh-so-clever buddy—hanging from a tree branch. Twisting in the wind like . . . like a sack of bait!

What was the contingency plan?

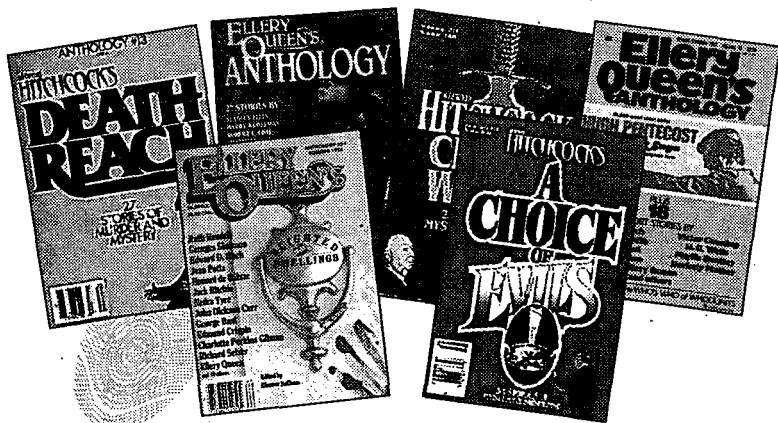
They hadn't made one. "My plan's too brilliant to need one," Lobolew had said.

Lobowill went back to the sign struggling against panic. Some choice: go on playing dumb and woolly or throw himself to the wolfhounds!

He looked down and thought, I can do this. Just take it one bite of grass at a time . . . and don't try to bleat.

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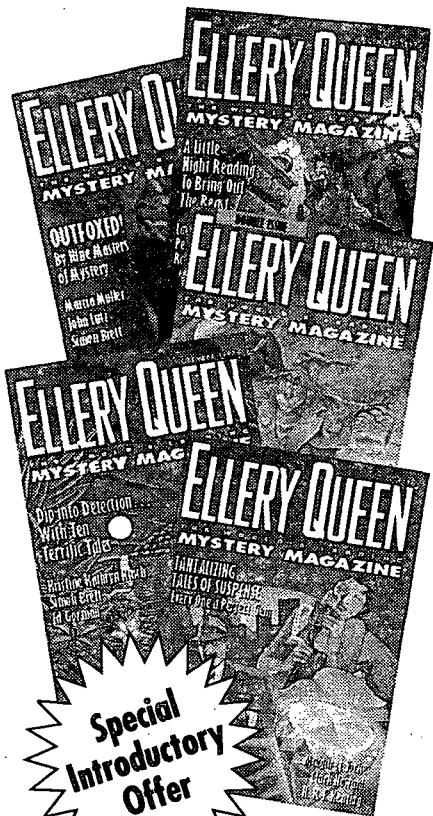
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Finally—a "cure" for bad breath!

For years, the cause of chronic bad breath has been misdiagnosed, but a dentist's research has led to TheraBreath™, a dramatic treatment system that works naturally and effectively.

It is estimated that over 80 million people worldwide suffer from bad breath, or halitosis. In the past, treatment has consisted of masking the odor with mouthwashes or mints, flooding the mouth with alcohol-based rinses, or the latest craze, popping pills that claim to cure the problem in the stomach. None of these treatments work, because halitosis is caused by bacteria on the back of the tongue and upper throat that produce sulfurous gases. The way to stop bad breath is to stop this process, and this is the secret behind the revolutionary TheraBreath™ system.

A scientific solution. As a dentist with a degree in bacteriology, Dr. Harold Katz has been keenly aware of the widespread nature of this problem. It was not until his daughter came to him about her halitosis, however, that he began to research the problem in earnest. His studies led him to an amazing

discovery about the source of bad breath: it does not originate in the digestive system, and the food you eat has no direct effect on your breath.

Certain foods, however, contribute to the production of sulfurous gases in the back of the mouth. Mints and mouth-washes intended to mask or prevent bad breath actually worsen the condition because sugar and alcohol dry out the mouth. Many common medications for everything from

high blood pressure to depression have the same drying effect, resulting in the formation of odorous gases. Mucous from post-nasal drip contains dense proteins that are full of sulfur. Some treatments for halitosis contain Sodium Lauryl Sulfate, which can cause canker sores. The only effective means of eliminating the sulfur gas production is to introduce oxygen to the bacteria, causing them to produce tasteless, odorless sulfates.

Effective, safe and natural. At his California Breath-Clinic, Dr. Katz has perfected a five-step program for treating halitosis. By using these products on a regular basis, chronic halitosis sufferers can end their problem. The TheraBreath system eliminates the problem of bitter or sour taste in the mouth, improves general periodontal health and will even whiten teeth. TheraBreath has a mild spearmint flavor that tastes great and creates pleasant, neutral breath. It contains no SLS compounds, so you will not suffer from an increase in canker sores or any other side effects. These products are all-natural and simply introduce a greater amount of oxygen into the mouth's chemistry.

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Dear Dr. Katz,

Our son has had a breath problem for years. He tried mouth-washes and mints.

We took him to doctors and dentists, and even had his tonsils removed.

Nothing worked, until he tried your product. I am so thankful and thrilled that you found the solution to his problem. You'll never know how much you changed his life!

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